













## Chapter One

THERE was nothing to distinguish the the *Murmania* from that of any other ship leaving New York in October for Southampton. At the crowded gangways there was a rain of ultimate kisses, from the quayside the speeding handkerchiefs. Ladies in blanket-coats to the arrangement of their table-stewards bouquets presented by friends who, as the case had been glad or sorry to see them go. Middle-aged women who were probably not at all conspicuous on shore made their appearance in caps that they might not be about wearing even during their University days. In the first confusion of settling down ate men came from the gift boxes lying about the cabins most likely to be given (or perhaps to want) for some young women with fresh complexions, shawls, o' shanters, brightly coloured jumpers, and big shoes were already on familiar terms with one of the ship's officers, and their laughter (which would be one of those unending oceanic accompaniments to land so pleasant again) was even now competing with the noise of the screw. Everybody boasted aloud that they were really well in the *Murmania*, and hoped silently that the sense of being imprisoned in a decaying hot (or whatever more or less apt comparison was made to suggest the atmosphere below decks) would pass off like fresh Atlantic breezes. Indeed it might be said, in the case of a few ivory-faced ladies already lying down, of a professional aloofness of those who are a prey to headaches, that outwardly optimism was rampant.

It was not surprising therefore that John T. the successful romantic playwright and unsuccessful novelist, should on finding himself hemmed in by the incredible cheerfulness surrender to his own place at home. This was one of those moments when he

## Poor Relations

and that the accusation of sentimentality so persistently laid against his work by superior critics was rebutted out of the very mouth of real life. He looked round at his fellow-passengers as though he would congratulate them on conforming to his later and more profitable theory of art; and if occasionally he could not help seeing a stewardess with a glance of discreet sympathy reveal to an enquirer the ship's provision or human weakness, he did not on this account feel better disposed toward morbid intrusions either upon art or life, partly because he was himself an excellent sailor and partly because after all as a realist he had unquestionably not been a success.

"Time for a shave before lunch, steward?" he enquired heartily.

"The first bugle will go in about twenty minutes, sir."

John paused for an instant at his own cabin to extract from his suit-case the particular outrage upon conventional head-gear (it was a deerstalker of Lovat tweed) that he had evolved for this voyage; and presently he was sitting in the barber-shop, wondering at first why anybody should be expected to buy the miscellaneous articles exposed for sale at such enhanced prices on every hook and in every nook of the little saloon, and soon afterward seriously considering the advantage of a pair of rope-soled shoes upon a heeling deck.

"Very natty things those, sir," said the barber. "I laid in a stock once at Gib., when we did the southern rowt. Shave you close, sir?"

"Once over, please."

"Skin tender?"

"Rather tender."

"Yes, sir. And the beard's a bit strong, sir. Shave yourself, sir?"

"Usually, but I was up rather early this morning."

"Safety razor, sir?"

"If you think such a description justifiable—yes—a safety."

"They're all the go now, and no mistake . . . safety bicycles, safety matches, safety razors . . . they've all come in our time . . . yes, sir, just a little bit to the right—thank you, sir! Not your first crossing, I take it?"

## Poor Relations

"No, my third."

"Interesting place, America. But I come for worth myself. Hair's getting rather thin round. Would you like something to briskeen up the growth? Another time? Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Paid left's it, I think?"

"No grease," said John as fiercely as he ever. The barber seemed to replace the pot of brilliantine with

"What *would* you like then?" He might have been ing a spoilt child. "Flowers-and-honey? Eau de Cologne? Or perhaps a friction? I've got lavingder, carnation flower, vilit, lilerk . . ."

"Bay-rum," John declared firmly.

The barber sighed for such an unadventurous customer. John, who could not bear to hurt even the delicate emotions of a barber, changed his mind and thrust a smiling bustle of gratification.

"Rather strong," John said, half apologetically, as the friction was being administered the barber huffed in jerks how every time he went ashore in New York. In the pool he was in the habit of searching about for a wash or tonic or pomade, and John did not want to feel that such enterprise was unappreciated.

"Strong is it? Well, that's a good fault, sir."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"What took my fancy was the natural way it was done."

"Yes, yes, painfully natural," John agreed.

He stood up and confronted himself in the barbers' mirror regarding the fair, almost florid man rather under the height with sanguine blue eyes and full but not overplump cheeks therein reflected, he came to the comforting conclusion that he did not look his forty-two years and a half. While his muffled whistle was shaping rather than a tune of *Nancy Lee*, he nearly asked the barber to take his age. However, he decided not to risk it, pulled up the lapels of his smoke-coloured tweed coat, put on a stalker, tipped the barber sufficiently well to secure a caress from the brush, promised to meditate the merits of the rope-soled shoes, and stepped jauntily in the door.

## Poor Relations

feel that the accusation of sentimentality so persistently laid against his work by superior critics was rebutted out of the very mouth of real life. He looked round at his fellow-passengers as though he would congratulate them on conforming to his later and more profitable theory of art; and if occasionally he could not help seeing a stewardess with a glance of discreet sympathy reveal to an enquirer the ship's provision of human weakness, he did not on this account feel better disposed toward morbid intrusions either upon art or life. Partly because he was himself an excellent sailor and partly because after all as a realist he had unquestionably not been a success.

"Time for a shave before lunch, steward?" he enquired heartily.

"The first bugle will go in about twenty minutes, sir."

John paused for an instant at his own cabin to extract from his suit-case the particular outrage upon conventional headgear (it was a deerstalker of Lovat tweed) that he had evolved for this voyage; and presently he was sitting in the barber's shop, wondering at first why anybody should be expected to buy the miscellaneous articles exposed for sale at such enhanced prices on every hook and in every nook of the little saloon, and soon afterward seriously considering the advantage of a pair of rope-soled shoes upon a heeling deck.

"Very natty things those, sir," said the barber. "I laid in a stock once at Gib., when we did the southern rowt. Shave you close, sir?"

"Once over, please."

"Skin tender?"

"Rather tender."

"Yes, sir. And the beard's a bit strong, sir. Shave yourself, sir?"

"Usually, but I was up rather early this morning."

"Safety razor, sir?"

"If you think such a description justifiable—yes—a safety."

"They're all the go now, and no mistake . . . safety bicycles, safety matches, safety razors . . . they've all come in our time . . . yes, sir, just a little bit to the right—than you, sir! Not your first crossing, I take it?"

## Poor Relations

"No, my third."

"Interesting place, America. But I come worth myself. Hair's getting rather thin round. Would you like something to briskeen up the gr. Another time? Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. P. left's it, I think?"

"No grease," said John as fiercely as he ever. barber seemed to replace the pot of brilliantine wi

"What *would* you like then?" He might have b ing a spoilt child. "Flowers-and-honey? Eau- Or perhaps a friction? I've got lavingder, ca flower, vilit, lilerk. . ."

"Bay-rum," John declared firmly.

The barber sighed for such an unadventurous John, who could not bear to hurt even the mc emotions of a barber, changed his mind and a smiling bustle of gratification.

"Rather strong," John said, half apologetically the friction was being administered the barber ha in jerks how every time he went ashore in New Yo pool he was in the habit of searching about for wash or tonic or pomade, and John did not want feel that such enterprise was unappreciated.

"Strong is it? Well, that's a good fault, sir."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"What took my fancy was the natural way it s

"Yes, yes, painfully natural," John agreed.

He stood up and confronted himself in the bail regarding the fair, almost florid man rather unde height with sanguine blue eyes and full but cle therein reflected, he came to the comforting cc he did not look his forty-two years and a ha while his muffled whistle was shaping rather than tune of *Nancy Lee*, he nearly asked the barber age. However, he decided not to risk it, pulle lapels of his smoke-coloured tweed coat, put stalker, tipped the barber sufficiently well to caress from the brush, promised to meditate the the rope-soled shoes, and stepped jauntily in the



## Poor Relations

leave the table immediately, because after all nobles as yet unvexed waters could suspect him of all repletion; finally, hoping that the much powdered opposite swathed in mauve chiffons was getting tired of the fragrance, he stayed where he was. Nevertheless exhilaration had departed; his neighbours all snoring; and congratulating himself that after this fine lunch he might expect to be put at the cap in recognition of the celebrity that he could find. John took from his pocket a bundle of letters which just before he had left his hotel and busied himself for the rest of the meal.

His success as a romantic playwright and his failure he would have preferred to think of it in the same way, fixing the guilty fragrance upon the lady in making his comparative failure—as a realistic novelist had destroyed John's passion for what he called 'being small matters,' and it was in pursuit of this that having his letters in two heaps which he mentally labelled 'pain' and 'pleasure' he began with the former, as a child ought to begin) his tea with the bread and butter and it with the plumcake. In John's case, fresh from his might be described as a triumphant production in the butter was spread so thickly that 'business' was bidding a name for such pleasantly nutritious consumption. His agent had sent him the returns of the second play, playing to capacity in one of the largest New York theatres, nearer to a material paradise than anything outside the median religion. Then there was an offer from one of the film companies to produce his romantic drama of the past, that wonderful riot of colour and Biblical imagery, *The Fall of Babylon*. They ventured to think that the cinematograph would do his imagination more justice than the theatre, particularly as upon their dramatic ranch they now had more than a hundred real camels and a few elephants. John chuckled at the idea of a few minutes compensating for the absence of his words, but nevertheless the entrance of Nebuchadnezzar, yes, it should be effective . . . and the great grass-eating scene, y-



positively be more impressive on the films . . . with one or two audiences it had trembled for a moment between the sublime and the ridiculous. It was a pity the offer had not arrived before he was leaving New York, but no doubt he should be able to talk it over with the London representatives of the firm. Hullø, here was Janet Bond writing to him . . . charming woman, charming actress. . . . He wandered for a few minutes rather vaguely in the maze of her immense handwriting, but disentangled his comprehension at last and decyphered :

The Parthenon Theatre,  
Sole Proprietress : Miss Janet Bond.

October 10, 1910.

Dear Mr. Touchwood,

*I wonder if you have forgotten our talk at Sir Percy's that night? I'm so hoping not. And your scheme for a real Joan of Arc? Do think of me this winter. Your picture of the scene with Gilles de Rais—you see I followed your advice and read him up—has haunted me ever since. I can hear the horses' hoofs coming nearer and nearer and the cries of the murdered children. I'm so glad you've had a success with "Lucretia" in New York. I don't think it would suit me from what I read about it. You know how particular my public is. That's why I'm so anxious to play the Maid. When will "Lucretia" be produced in London? And where? There are many rumours. Do come and see me when you get back to England, and I'll tell you who I've thought of to play Gilles. I think you'll find him very intelligent. But of course everything depends on your inclination, or should I say inspiration? And then that wonderful speech to the Bishop! How does it begin? "Bishop, thou hast betrayed thy holy trust." Do be a little flattered that I've remembered that line. It needn't all be in blank verse, and I think little Truscott would be so good as the Bishop. You see how enthusiastic I am and how I believe in the idea. All good wishes.*

*Yours sincerely and hopefully,  
Janet Bond.*

John certainly was a little flattered that Miss Bond should have remembered the Maid's great speech to the Bishop of

## Poor Relations

Beauvais, and the actress's enthusiasm roused in answering flame, so that the cruet before him looked like the castellated walls of Orleans, and while he was fixed upon the bowl of salad he began to compose.

*Scene I—Open country. Enter Joan on horseback. At the summit of a grassy knoll she searches the horizon.* So the author regarding his heroine on top of the salad head steward came over and asked anxiously if there was anything the matter with it. And even when John told him that there was nothing he took it away and told the under-stewards to remove the caterpillar and bring the bowl. Meanwhile, John had picked up the other letters and begun to read his news from home.

65, Hill Road,  
St. John's Wood, N.  
Oct 1891

Dear Johnnie,

*We have just read in the "Telegraph" of your letter and we are both very glad. Edith writes me that she has just received your letter from you. I daresay you thought she would send it but she didn't, and of course I understand you're disappointed. I should have liked to have a letter ourselves. James has just told me that he is probably going to do a book on the movement in literature. He says that the time has come for a final survey of it. He is also writing some articles for the "Fortnightly Review." We shall all be so glad to hear from you again.*

Your affectionate sister-in-law,  
Beatrice

"Poor Beatrice," John thought penitently. "I should have sent her a line. She's a good soul. And James is a plucky fellow he is! Always full of schemes for articles. Wonderful really, to go on writing for an hour or so about twenty people. And I used to grumble because my articles hadn't world-wide circulations. Poor old James is a good fellow."

He picked up the next letter, which he found was from his other sister-in-law.



## Poor Relations

Eleanor—entirely on her side of course, but Bertram such a bad influence for Harold and so I told her that I think you would like her to take possession of your house before you'd had time to live in it yourself!! Besides, all the children all at once would have disturbed poor Mama. I drove over with Frida the other day and tells me you would like a letter too, but you always spoil people. Poor little Frida looks very peaky. Much love from me. She is always asking when you're coming home. Mama is glad to say.

Your affectionate sister  
Hilda

"She might have told me a little more about the house," John murmured to himself. Then he began to dig the Ambles and to plant old-fashioned flowers along the red-brick garden walls. "I shall be in time to see the end of the woods," he thought. The *Murmania* aspired with a plunge, and several of the rumpled hurriedly from table to prostrate themselves for the voyage. John opened a fourth letter from England.

The Vicarage,  
Newton Candover,  
Hants.

My dearest John,

I was so glad to get your letter, and so glad to hear of your success. Laurence says that if he were not a vicar he would like to be a dramatic author. In fact he's writing a play on a Biblical subject, but he fears he will have trouble with it as it takes a very broad view of Christianity. You think Laurence has recently become very broad? He thinks people like it, but unfortunately old Mrs. Paxton—I mean—the patroness of the living—is so bigoted that she has had a great deal of trouble with her. I'm sorry to hear dear little Frida is looking thin. We think it's the weather. Nothing but rain. Ambles was looking beautiful when I was over last week, but Harold is a little bumptious and doesn't seem to see his faults. Dear Mama we





*better than I've seen her for ages. Frida sends such a lot of love to dearest Uncle John. She never stops talking about you. I sometimes get quite jealous for Laurence. Not really of course, because family affection is the foundation of civil life. Laurence is out in the garden speaking to a man whose pig got into our conservatory this morning. Much love.*

*Your loving sister,  
Edith.*

John put the letter down with a faint sigh: Edith was his favourite sister, but he often wished that she had not married a parson. Then he took up the last letter of the family packet, which was from his housekeeper in Church Row.

36 Church Row,  
Hampstead, N.W.

*Dear Sir,*

*This is to inform you with the present that everything is very well at your house and that Maud and Elsa is very well as it leaves me at present. We as heard nothink from Emily since she as gone down to Hambles your other house, and we hope which is Maud, Elsa and myself you wont spend all your time out of London which is looking lovely at present with the leaves beginning to turn and all. With dutiful respects from Maud, Elsa and self,*

*I am,*

*Your obedient servant,  
Mary Worfolk.*

"Dear old Mrs. Worfolk! She's already quite jealous of Ambles . . . charming trait really, for after all it means she appreciates Church Row. Upon my soul, I feel a bit jealous of Ambles myself."

John began to ponder the pleasant heights of Hampstead and to think of the pale blue October sky and of the yellow leaves shuffling and slipping along the quiet alleys in the autumn wind; to think, too, of his library window and of London spread out below in a refulgence of smoke and gold; to think of the chrysanthemums in his little garden and of the sparrows' chirping in the virginia-creeper that would soon be all aglow

## Poor Relations

like a well banked-up fire against his coming. Five letters really, everyone of them full of good wishes affection! The *Murmania* swooped forward, and a faint tingle of glass and cutlery. John gathered up spondence to go on deck and bless the Atlantic for pathway to home. As he rose from the table he said :

"Yes, my dear thing, but I've never been a poet yet, and I don't intend to start now."

The saloon was empty except for himself and the opposite, the climax of whose conversation had been such a harsh fitness of comment upon the letters he had been reading. John was angry with himself for so easily made upon the romantic shield he upheld against onset; he felt that he had somehow been led into a place where all his noblest sentiments had been massacred. Bells sounded upon the empty saloon with an almost gravity; and, when the two women passed out, he stood and read right through the family letters from a different point. The fact of it was that there had turned out few currants in the cake, for the eating of which he had prepared himself with such well-buttered bread. Few. There was not a single one, unless Mrs. Worfolk's remark to the idea of Ambles might be considered the grain of a currant. John rose at once when he had finished reading and put them in his pocket, and followed the unconscious of his hearth on deck. He soon caught sight of the two where arm-in-arm they were pacing the sunlit stair and apparently enjoying the gusty south-west wind. He wondered how long it would be before he was given an opportunity to make their acquaintance, and tried to direct his promenade so that he should always meet them either aft or forward, but never amidships where the muffled passengers reclined in critical contemplation of their fellow-travellers over the top of the last popular novel.

"Some men, you know," he told himself, "would not walk with a mere remark about the weather. They stop to consider if their company was welcome."





## Poor Relations

this type of woman seemed a prey to bluntness and blif to display her atmospheric charms she had need of landscape for a background. He found himself glibly of her as a type ; but with what type could she be Surely she was attracting him by being exceptional rather typical ; and John soothed his alarmed celibacy by that she appealed to him with a hint of virginal wisdom promised a perfect intercourse, if only their acquaintance could be achieved naturally, that is to say without suggestion of an ulterior object. *She had never been in relation yet, and she did not intend to start being one* course such a woman was still unmarried. But how avoided being a poor relation ? What was her work was she coming home to England ? And who was companion ? He looked at the other woman who walked with a boyish slouch, wore gold pince-nez, and had a mouth, not naturally tight but one that had been by driving and riding. It was absurd to walk up and down ever like this ; the acquaintance must be made in or not at all ; it would never do to hang round them for an opportunity of conversation. John decided on a simple remark the next time he met them face to face when he arrived at the after end of the promenade had vanished, and the embarrassing thought occurred that perhaps having divined his intention they had pointedly snubbed him. He went to the rail, and to watch the water undulating past ; a sudden gust his cap and took it out to sea. He clapped his hands to his head ; a fragrance of carnations breathed upon windy sunlight ; a voice behind him softly trembled laughter murmured :

" I say, bad luck."

John commended his deerstalker to the care of all Oceanides and turned round : it was quite easy after he was glad that he had not thought of deliberately blowing his cap into the sea.

" Look, it's actually floating like a boat," she exclaimed.

" Yes, it was shaped like a boat," John said ; he was how absurd it was now to fancy that swiftly vanished

so serenely satisfied with themselves that they'd actually succeed . . . yes, confound them . . . they'd bring it off! Yet, after all, I suppose in a way that without vanity I might presume they *would* be rather interested to meet me. Because of course there's no doubt that people *are* interested in authors. But it's no good . . . I can't do that . . . this is really one of those moments when I feel as if I was still seventeen years old . . . shyness I suppose . . . yet the rest of my family aren't shy."

This took John's thoughts back to his relations, but to a much less complacent point of view of them than before that maliciously apposite remark overheard in the saloon had lighted up the group as abruptly and unbecomingly as a magnesium flash. However inconsistent he might appear, he was afraid that he should be more critical of them in future. He began to long to talk over his affairs with that girl and, looking up at this moment, he caught her eyes, which either because the weather was so gusty or because he was so ready to hang decorations round a simple fact seemed to him like calm moorland pools, deep violet-brown pools in heathery solitudes. Her complexion had the texture of a rose in November, the texture that gains a rare lucency from the greyness and moisture by which one might suppose it would be ruined. She was wearing a coat and skirt of Harris tweed of a shade of misty green, and with her slim figure and fine features she seemed at first glance not more than twenty. But John had not passed her another half-dozen times before he had decided that she was almost a woman of thirty. He looked to see if she was wearing a wedding-ring and was already enough interested in her to be glad that she was not. This relief was, of course, not at all due to any vision of himself in a more intimate relationship, but merely because he was glad to find that her personality of which he was by now more definitely aware than of her beauty (well, not beauty, but charm, and yet perhaps after all he was being too grudging in not awarding her positive beauty) would be her own. There was something distinctly romantic in this beautiful young woman of nearly thirty leading her own life unimpeded by a loud-voiced husband. Of course the husband might have had a gentle voice, but usually

## Poor Relations

this type of woman seemed a prey to bluntness and bluntness to display her atmospheric charms she had need of a landscape for a background. He found himself glibly of her as a type ; but with what type could she be . Surely she was attracting him by being exceptional rather than typical ; and John soothed his alarmed celibacy by that she appealed to him with a hint of virginal wisdom promised a perfect intercourse, if only their acquaintance could be achieved naturally, that is to say without suggestion of an ulterior object. *She had never been in a relation yet, and she did not intend to start being one* course such a woman was still unmarried. But how avoided being a poor relation ? What was her work was she coming home to England ? And who was her companion ? He looked at the other woman who walked with her with a boyish slouch, wore gold pince-nez, and a mouth, not naturally tight but one that had been so by driving and riding. It was absurd to walk up and down ever like this ; the acquaintance must be made : or not at all ; it would never do to hang round them for an opportunity of conversation. John decided on a simple remark the next time he met them face to face when he arrived at the after end of the promenade had vanished, and the embarrassing thought occurred that perhaps having divined his intention they pointedly snubbed him. He went to the rail, and to watch the water undulating past ; a sudden gust blew his cap and took it out to sea. He clapped his hand to his head ; a fragrance of carnations breathed up the windy sunlight ; a voice behind him softly trembled ; laughter murmured :

“ I say, bad luck.”

John commended his deerstalker to the care of all Oceanides and turned round : it was quite easy as he was glad that he had not thought of deliberating his cap blow into the sea.

“ Look, it's actually floating like a boat,” she exclaimed.

“ Yes, it was shaped like a boat,” John said ; he was how absurd it was now to fancy that swiftly vanished

so serenely satisfied with themselves that they'd actually succeed . . . yes, confound them . . . they'd bring it off! Yet, after all, I suppose in a way that without vanity I might presume they *would* be rather interested to meet me. Because of course there's no doubt that people *are* interested in authors. But it's no good . . . I can't do that . . . this is really one of those moments when I feel as if I was still seventeen years old . . . shyness I suppose . . . yet the rest of my family aren't shy."

This took John's thoughts back to his relations, but to a much less complacent point of view of them than before that maliciously apposite remark overheard in the saloon had lighted up the group as abruptly and unbecomingly as a magnesium flash. However inconsistent he might appear, he was afraid that he should be more critical of them in future. He began to long to talk over his affairs with that girl and, looking up at this moment, he caught her eyes, which either because the weather was so gusty or because he was so ready to hang decorations round a simple fact seemed to him like calm moorland pools, deep violet-brown pools in heathery solitudes. Her complexion had the texture of a rose in November, the texture that gains a rare lucency from the greyness and moisture by which one might suppose it would be ruined. She was wearing a coat and skirt of Harris tweed of a shade of misty green, and with her slim figure and fine features she seemed at first glance not more than twenty. But John had not passed her another half-dozen times before he had decided that she was almost a woman of thirty. He looked to see if she was wearing a wedding-ring and was already enough interested in her to be glad that she was not. This relief was, of course, not at all due to any vision of himself in a more intimate relationship, but merely because he was glad to find that her personality of which he was by now more definitely aware than of her beauty (well, not beauty, but charm, and yet perhaps after all he was being too grudging in not awarding her positive beauty) would be her own. There was something distinctly romantic in this beautiful young woman of nearly thirty leading her own life unimpeded by a loud-voiced husband. Of course the husband might have had a gentle voice, but usually

## Poor Relations

this type of woman seemed a prey to bluntness and to if to display her atmospheric charms she had need of landscape for a background. He found himself glibly of her as a type ; but with what type could she be ? Surely she was attracting him by being exceptional and typical ; and John soothed his alarmed celibacy by that she appealed to him with a hint of virginal wisdom promised a perfect intercourse, if only their acquaintance could be achieved naturally, that is to say without suggestion of an ulterior object. *She had never been in a relation yet, and she did not intend to start being one* ; of course such a woman was still unmarried. But how avoided being a poor relation ? What was her work ? was she coming home to England ? And who was her companion ? He looked at the other woman, who walked with her with a boyish slouch, wore gold pince-nez, and had a mouth, not naturally tight but one that had been so by driving and riding. It was absurd to walk up and down ever like this ; the acquaintance must be made : or not at all ; it would never do to hang round them for an opportunity of conversation. John decided to make a simple remark the next time he met them face to face when he arrived at the after end of the promenade : but it had vanished, and the embarrassing thought occurred that, perhaps having divined his intention they had pointedly snubbed him. He went to the rail, and looked on to watch the water undulating past ; a sudden gust blew his cap and took it out to sea. He clapped his hand to his head ; a fragrance of carnations breathed upon the windy sunlight ; a voice behind him softly tremulous laughter murmured :

“ I say, bad luck.”

John commended his deerstalker to the care of all the Oceanides and turned round : it was quite easy after that he was glad that he had not thought of deliberately blowing his cap into the sea.

“ Look, it’s actually floating like a boat,” she exclaimed.

“ Yes, it was shaped like a boat,” John said ; he thought how absurd it was now to fancy that swiftly vanished

inappropriate piece of concave tweed should only a few seconds ago have been worn the other way round on a human head.

"But you mustn't catch cold," she added. "Haven't you another cap?"

John did possess another cap, one that just before he left England he had bought about dusk in the Burlington Arcade, one that in the velvety bloom of a July evening had seemed worthy of summer skies and seas, but that in the glare of the following day had seemed more like the shreds of barbaric attire that are brought back by travellers from exotic lands to be taken out of a glass case and shown to visitors when the conversation is flagging on Sunday afternoons in the home counties. Now if John's plays were full of fierce hues, if his novels had been *sepiâ* studies of realism which the public considered painful and the critics described as painstaking, his private life had been of a mild uniform pink, a pinkishness that recalled the chaste hospitality of the best spare-bedroom. Never yet in that pink life had he let himself go to the extent of wearing a cap, which, even if worn afloat by a coloured prize-fighter crossing the Atlantic to defend or challenge supremacy, would have created an amused consternation, but which on the head of a well-known romantic playwright must arouse at least dismay and possibly panic. Yet this John (he had reached the point of regarding himself with objective surprise), the pinkishness of whose life, though it might be a protest against cynicism and gloom, was eternally half-way to a blush, went off to his cabin with the intention of putting on that very cap. With himself for a while he argued that something must be done to imprison the smell of carnations, that a bowler hat would look absurd, that he really must not catch cold; but all the time this John knew perfectly well that what he really wanted was to give a practical demonstration of his youth. This John did not care a damn about his success as a romantic playwright, but he did care a great deal that these two young women should vote him a suitable companion for the rest of the voyage.

"Why, it's really not so bad," he assured himself, when before the mirror he tried to judge the effect. "I rather think it's better than the other one. Of course, if I had seen when I

## Poor Relations

bought it that the checks were purple and not blue. I shouldn't have bought it . . . but, by Jove, I'm I didn't notice them. After all, I have a right to be eccentric in my costume. What the deuce does it matter if people do stare? Let them stare! I shall be the last to feel seasick, anyway."

John walked defiantly back to the promenade where several people who had not bothered to remark the very florid man before now asked who he was, and followed him along the deck with the easily interested transatlantic passenger.

For the rest of the voyage John never knew what attention his entrance into the saloon always evoked to his being the man who wore the unusual cap of the man who had written *The Fall of Babylon*; nor did he bother to make sure, for being fortified during the voyage by the company of Miss Doris Horn. With Miss Ida Merritt he thoroughly enjoyed himself.

"Now am I attributing to Miss Hamilton more than she's really got?" he asked himself on the last night of the passage, a stormy night off the Irish coast, while he looked at his reflection in the creaking cabin mirror. John was a little like most men with clear-cut profiles to take advice from reflection, and perhaps it was his dramatic instinct that usually made him talk aloud to this lifelong friend. "Have I been too impulsive in this friendship? Have I? That's the question. I certainly told her a lot about myself, and she appreciated my confidence. Yet suppose that she were an ordinary young woman and goes gossiping all over Europe about meeting me? I really must remember that I'm not a nonentity and that, though Miss Hamilton is not a journalist, her friend is, and what is more confessed that the sole object of her visit to America had been to interview distinguished men with the help of Miss Hamilton. The way she talked about her victims reminded me of the way that fellow in the smoking-saloon talked about the tarpon-fishing off Florida. Famous American statesmen, financiers, and architects exist quite impersonally for her to be interviewed. And when I come to think of it,"



Merritt's rod for five days, and as with all the others the bait was Miss Hamilton."

John's mistrust in the prudence of his behaviour during the voyage had been suddenly roused by the prospect of reaching Liverpool next day. The word positively exuded disillusionment; it was as anti-romantic as a notebook of Herbert Spencer. He undressed and got into his bunk; the motion of the ship and the continual opening and shutting of cabin doors all the way along the corridor kept him from sleep, and for a long time he lay awake while the delicious freedom of the seas was gradually enslaved by the sullen, prosaic, puritanical, bilious word—Liverpool. He had come down to his cabin, full of the exhilaration of a last quick stroll up and down the spray-whipped deck; he had come down from a long and pleasant talk all about himself where he and Miss Hamilton had sat in the lee of some part of a ship's furniture the name of which he did not know and did not like to ask—a long and pleasant talk, cosily wrapped in two rugs glistening faintly in the starlight with salty rime; he had come down from a successful elimination of Miss Merritt, his whole personality marinated in freedom, he might say; and now the mere thought of Liverpool was enough to disenchant him and to make him feel rather like a man who was recovering from a brilliant, a too brilliant revelation of himself provoked by champagne. He began to piece together the conversation and search for indiscretions. To begin with, he had certainly talked a great deal too much about himself; it was not dignified for a man in his position to be so prodigally frank with a young woman he had only known for five days. Suppose she had been laughing at him all the time? Suppose that even now she was laughing at him with Miss Merritt? "Good heavens, what an amount I told her," John gasped aloud. "I even told her my real circulation when I used to write novels, and I very nearly told her how much I made out of *The Fall of Babylon*, though since that really was a good deal, it wouldn't have mattered so much. And what did I say about my family? Well, perhaps that isn't so important. But how much did I tell her of my scheme for *Joan of Arc*? Why, she might have been my confidential secretary by the way I talked. My confidential secretary?"

## Poor Relations

And why not? I am entitled to a secretary—in fact demands a secretary. But would she accept— Now don't let me be impulsive."

John began to laugh at himself for a quality in matter of fact he was if anything deficient. He of chaff himself, but of course always without the ill-nature, which is perhaps why he usually selects characteristics for genial reproof.

"Impulsive dog," he said to himself. "Go to don't forget that confidential secretaries afloat and secretaries ashore are very different propositions. I thought you were being jolly clever when you bought rope-soled shoes to keep your balance on a slippery deck; you ought to have bought a rope-soled cap to keep from slipping."

This seemed to him in the easy optimism that permeates the borders of sleep an excellent joke, and he chuckled through the ivory gate.

The next day John behaved helpfully and politely to Customs, and indeed continued to be helpful and his companions of the voyage were established in Euston. He had carefully written down the address with a view to calling on them one day, but he was writing the number of the square in The Strand, thinking about Ambles and trying to decide whether to make a dash across London to Waterloo on the morning train, catching the 9.5 p.m. or spend the night at his home in Row.

"I think perhaps I'd better stay in town to-night," he said. "Good-bye. Most delightful trip across—see you soon, I hope. You don't advise me to try for the Continent, do you?" he asked once more anxiously.

Miss Hamilton laughed from the depths of the throat; she laughed, for the briefest moment John felt a breeze sweep through the railway station.

"I recommend a good night's rest," she said.

So John's last thought of her was of a nice practical woman; but, as he once again told himself, the idea of a secretary was absurd. Besides, did she even know what

Merritt's rod for five days, and as with all the others the bait was Miss Hamilton."

John's mistrust in the prudence of his behaviour during the voyage had been suddenly roused by the prospect of reaching Liverpool next day. The word positively exuded disillusionment; it was as anti-romantic as a notebook of Herbert Spencer. He undressed and got into his bunk; the motion of the ship and the continual opening and shutting of cabin doors all the way along the corridor kept him from sleep, and for a long time he lay awake while the delicious freedom of the seas was gradually enslaved by the sullen, prosaic, puritanical, bilious word—Liverpool. He had come down to his cabin, full of the exhilaration of a last quick stroll up and down the spray-whipped deck; he had come down from a long and pleasant talk all about himself where he and Miss Hamilton had sat in the lee of some part of a ship's furniture the name of which he did not know and did not like to ask—a long and pleasant talk, cosily wrapped in two rugs glistening faintly in the starlight with salty rime; he had come down from a successful elimination of Miss Merritt, his whole personality marinated in freedom, he might say; and now the mere thought of Liverpool was enough to disenchant him and to make him feel rather like a man who was recovering from a brilliant, a too brilliant revelation of himself provoked by champagne. He began to piece together the conversation and search for indiscretions. To begin with, he had certainly talked a great deal too much about himself; it was not dignified for a man in his position to be so prodigally frank with a young woman he had only known for five days. Suppose she had been laughing at him all the time? Suppose that even now she was laughing at him with Miss Merritt? "Good heavens, what an amount I told her," John gasped aloud. "I even told her my real circulation when I used to write novels, and I very nearly told her how much I made out of *The Fall of Babylon*, though since that really was a good deal, it wouldn't have mattered so much. And what did I say about my family? Well, perhaps that isn't so important. But how much did I tell her of my scheme for *Joan of Arc*? Why, she might have been my confidential secretary by the way I talked. My confidential secretary?

## Poor Relations

And why not? I am entitled to a secretary—in fact demands a secretary. But would she accept su  
Now don't let me be impulsive."

John began to laugh at himself for a quality in matter of fact he was if anything deficient. He of chaff himself, but of course always without the ill-nature, which is perhaps why he usually selected characteristics for genial reproof.

"Impulsive dog," he said to himself. "Go to don't forget that confidential secretaries afloat and secretaries ashore are very different propositions. thought you were being jolly clever when you be rope-soled shoes to keep your balance on a slipper. you ought to have bought a rope-soled cap to keep from slipping."

This seemed to him in the easy optimism that p the borders of sleep an excellent joke, and he p chuckle through the ivory gate.

The next day John behaved helpfully and poi Customs, and indeed continued to be helpful and his companions of the voyage were established i Euston. He had carefully written down the address with a view to calling on them one day, b he was writing the number of the square in Ch thinking about Ambles and trying to decide wheth make a dash across London to Waterloo on catching the 9.5 p.m. or spend the night at his ho Row.

"I think perhaps I'd better stay in town to-nig  
"Good-bye. Most delightful trip across—see yc soon, I hope. You don't advise me, to try for asked once more anxiously.

Miss Hamilton laughed from the depths of th she laughed, for the briefest moment John fel breeze sweep through the railway station.

"I recommend a good night's rest," she said.

So John's last thought of her was of a nice p woman; but, as he once again told himself, the i tary was absurd. Besides, did she even know sho

Merritt's rod for five days, and as with all the others the bait was Miss Hamilton."

John's mistrust in the prudence of his behaviour during the voyage had been suddenly roused by the prospect of reaching Liverpool next day. The word positively exuded disillusionment; it was as anti-romantic as a notebook of Herbert Spencer. He undressed and got into his bunk; the motion of the ship and the continual opening and shutting of cabin doors all the way along the corridor kept him from sleep, and for a long time he lay awake while the delicious freedom of the seas was gradually enslaved by the sullen, prosaic, puritanical, bilious word—Liverpool. He had come down to his cabin, full of the exhilaration of a last quick stroll up and down the spray-whipped deck; he had come down from a long and pleasant talk all about himself where he and Miss Hamilton had sat in the lee of some part of a ship's furniture the name of which he did not know and did not like to ask—a long and pleasant talk, cosily wrapped in two rugs glistening faintly in the starlight with salty rime; he had come down from a successful elimination of Miss Merritt, his whole personality marinated in freedom, he might say; and now the mere thought of Liverpool was enough to disenchant him and to make him feel rather like a man who was recovering from a brilliant, a too brilliant revelation of himself provoked by champagne. He began to piece together the conversation and search for indiscretions. To begin with, he had certainly talked a great deal too much about himself; it was not dignified for a man in his position to be so prodigally frank with a young woman he had only known for five days. Suppose she had been laughing at him all the time? Suppose that even now she was laughing at him with Miss Merritt? "Good heavens, what an amount I told her," John gasped aloud. "I even told her my real circulation when I used to write novels, and I very nearly told her how much I made out of *The Fall of Babylon*, though since that really was a good deal, it wouldn't have mattered so much. And what did I say about my family? Well, perhaps that isn't so important. But how much did I tell her of my scheme for *Jean of Arc*? Why, she might have been my confidential secretary by the way I talked. My confidential secretary?

## Poor Relations

And why not? I am entitled to a secretary—in fact, a secretary demands a secretary. But would she accept such a position? Now don't let me be impulsive."

John began to laugh at himself for a quality in the matter of fact he was if anything deficient. He chaffed himself, but of course always without the least ill-nature, which is perhaps why he usually selected his own characteristics for genial reproof.

"Impulsive dog," he said to himself. "Go to! don't forget that confidential secretaries afloat and secretaries ashore are very different propositions. I thought you were being jolly clever when you bought rope-soled shoes to keep your balance on a slippery deck; you ought to have bought a rope-soled cap to keep from slipping."

This seemed to him in the easy optimism that put the borders of sleep an excellent joke, and he chuckled through the ivory gate.

The next day John behaved helpfully and politely to the Customs, and indeed continued to be helpful and his companions of the voyage were established at Euston. He had carefully written down the address with a view to calling on them one day, but while he was writing the number of the square in Chancery, he was thinking about Ambles and trying to decide whether to make a dash across London to Waterloo on the morning train, or catch the 9.5 p.m. or spend the night at his home in Row.

"I think perhaps I'd better stay in town to-night," he said. "Good-bye. Most delightful trip across—see you soon, I hope. You don't advise me to try for it," he asked once more anxiously.

Miss Hamilton laughed from the depths of her throat; she laughed, for the briefest moment John felt a breeze sweep through the railway station.

"I recommend a good night's rest," she said.

So John's last thought of her was of a nice, pleasant woman; but, as he once again told himself, the idea of a secretary was absurd. Besides, did she even know she

Merritt's rod for five days, and as with all the others the bait was Miss Hamilton."

John's mistrust in the prudence of his behaviour during the voyage had been suddenly roused by the prospect of reaching Liverpool next day. The word positively exuded disillusionment; it was as anti-romantic as a notebook of Herbert Spencer. He undressed and got into his bunk; the motion of the ship and the continual opening and shutting of cabin doors all the way along the corridor kept him from sleep, and for a long time he lay awake while the delicious freedom of the seas was gradually enslaved by the sullen, prosaic, puritanical, bilious word—Liverpool. He had come down to his cabin, full of the exhilaration of a last quick stroll up and down the spray-whipped deck; he had come down from a long and pleasant talk all about himself where he and Miss Hamilton had sat in the lee of some part of a ship's furniture the name of which he did not know and did not like to ask—a long and pleasant talk, cosily wrapped in two rugs glistening faintly in the starlight with salty rime; he had come down from a successful elimination of Miss Merritt, his whole personality marinated in freedom, he might say; and now the mere thought of Liverpool was enough to disenchant him and to make him feel rather like a man who was recovering from a brilliant, a too brilliant revelation of himself provoked by champagne. He began to piece together the conversation and search for indiscretions. To begin with, he had certainly talked a great deal too much about himself; it was not dignified for a man in his position to be so prodigally frank with a young woman he had only known for five days. Suppose she had been laughing at him all the time? Suppose that even now she was laughing at him with Miss Merritt? "Good heavens, what an amount I told her," John gasped aloud. "I even told her my real circulation when I used to write novels, and I very nearly told her how much I made out of *The Fall of Babylon*, though since that really was a good deal, it wouldn't have mattered so much. And what did I say about my family? Well, perhaps that isn't so important. But how much did I tell her of my scheme for *Joan of Arc*? Why, she might have been my confidential secretary by the way I talked. My confidential secretary."

## Poor Relations

And why not? I am entitled to a secretary—in fact demands a secretary. But would she accept? Now don't let me be impulsive."

John began to laugh at himself for a quality in matter of fact he was if anything deficient. He of chaff himself, but of course always without the least ill-nature, which is perhaps why he usually selected characteristics for genial reproof.

"Impulsive dog," he said to himself. "Go to don't forget that confidential secretaries afloat and secretaries ashore are very different propositions. I thought you were being jolly clever when you bought rope-soled shoes to keep your balance on a slipper, you ought to have bought a rope-soled cap to keep from slipping."

This seemed to him in the easy optimism that passed the borders of sleep an excellent joke, and he passed a chuckle through the ivory gate.

The next day John behaved helpfully and politely to Customs, and indeed continued to be helpful and his companions of the voyage were established in Euston. He had carefully written down the address with a view to calling on them one day, but he was writing the number of the square in Chelsea, thinking about Ambles and trying to decide whether to make a dash across London to Waterloo on the morning of catching the 9.5 p.m. or spend the night at his house in Row.

"I think perhaps I'd better stay in town to-night," he said. "Good-bye. Most delightful trip across—see you soon, I hope. You don't advise me to try for the third time, I asked once more anxiously."

Miss Hamilton laughed from the depths of the heart; she laughed, for the briefest moment John felt a breeze sweep through the railway station.

"I recommend a good night's rest," she said.

So John's last thought of her was of a nice practical woman; but, as he once again told himself, the idea of a secretary was absurd. Besides, did she even know short



Merritt's rod for five days, and as with all the others the bait was Miss Hamilton."

John's mistrust in the prudence of his behaviour during the voyage had been suddenly roused by the prospect of reaching Liverpool next day. The word positively exuded disillusionment; it was as anti-romantic as a notebook of Herbert Spencer. He undressed and got into his bunk; the motion of the ship and the continual opening and shutting of cabin doors all the way along the corridor kept him from sleep, and for a long time he lay awake while the delicious freedom of the seas was gradually enslaved by the sullen, prosaic, puritanical, bilious word—Liverpool. He had come down to his cabin, full of the exhilaration of a last quick stroll up and down the spray-whipped deck; he had come down from a long and pleasant talk all about himself where he and Miss Hamilton had sat in the lee of some part of a ship's furniture the name of which he did not know and did not like to ask—a long and pleasant talk, cosily wrapped in two rugs glistening faintly in the starlight with salty rime; he had come down from a successful elimination of Miss Merritt, his whole personality marinated in freedom, he might say; and now the mere thought of Liverpool was enough to disenchant him and to make him feel rather like a man who was recovering from a brilliant, a too brilliant revelation of himself provoked by champagne. He began to piece together the conversation and search for indiscretions. To begin with, he had certainly talked a great deal too much about himself; it was not dignified for a man in his position to be so prodigally frank with a young woman he had only known for five days. Suppose she had been laughing at him all the time? Suppose that even now she was laughing at him with Miss Merritt? "Good heavens, what an amount I told her," John gasped aloud. "I even told her my real circulation when I used to write novels, and I very nearly told her how much I made out of *The Fall of Babylon*, though since that really was a good deal, it wouldn't have mattered so much. And what did I say about my family? Well, perhaps that isn't so important. But how much did I tell her of my scheme for *Joan of Arc*? Why, she might have been my confidential secretary by the way I talked. My confidential secretary?

## Poor Relations

And why not? I am entitled to a secretary—in fact, a secretary demands a secretary. But would she accept? Now don't let me be impulsive."

John began to laugh at himself for a quality in a matter of fact he was if anything deficient. He chaffed himself, but of course always without the ill-nature, which is perhaps why he usually selected characteristics for genial reproof.

"Impulsive dog," he said to himself. "Go to, don't forget that confidential secretaries afloat and secretaries ashore are very different propositions. I thought you were being jolly clever when you bought rope-soled shoes to keep your balance on a slippery deck; you ought to have bought a rope-soled cap to keep you from slipping."

This seemed to him in the easy optimism that passes the borders of sleep an excellent joke, and he passed a chuckle through the ivory gate.

The next day John behaved helpfully and politely to Customs, and indeed continued to be helpful and kind to his companions of the voyage were established at Euston. He had carefully written down the address with a view to calling on them one day, but when he was writing the number of the square in Chelsea, he was thinking about Ambles and trying to decide whether to make a dash across London to Waterloo on the morning train, catching the 9.5 p.m. or spend the night at his house in Row.

"I think perhaps I'd better stay in town to-night," he said. "Good-bye. Most delightful trip across—see you soon, I hope. You don't advise me to try for it," he asked once more anxiously.

Miss Hamilton laughed from the depths of the throat; she laughed, for the briefest moment John felt a breeze sweep through the railway station.

"I recommend a good night's rest," she said.

So John's last thought of her was of a nice practical woman; but, as he once again told himself, the idea of a secretary was absurd. Besides, did she even know short-

"Do you know shorthand?" he turned round to shout as the taxi buzzed away; he did not hear her answer, if answer there was.

"Of course I can always write," he decided, and without one sigh he busied himself with securing his own taxi for Hampstead.

## Chapter Two

"I'VE got too many caps, Mrs. Worfolk," claimed next morning to his housekeeper. "give this one away."

"Yes, sir? Who would you like it given to?"

"Oh, anybody, anybody. Tramps very often boots, don't they? Some tramp might like it."

"Would you have any objections if I give it to sir?"

"None whatever."

"It seems almost too perky for a tramp, sir; an boy—well, he's just at the age when they like themselves a bit. He's doing very well too. His extremely satisfied with the way he's doing. Eatisfied, his employers are."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

"Yes, sir. Well, it's been some consolation to sister, I mean to say, after the way her husband hisself, and it's to be hoped Herbert'll take fair to me see, you *will* be having lunch at home I think."

John winced: this was precisely what he would have by catching the 9.5 at Waterloo last night.

"I shan't be in to lunch for a few days, Mrs. Worfolk—nor to dinner either as a matter of fact. No be down in the country. I must see after things know," he added with an attempt to suggest as possible a real anxiety about his new house.

"The country, oh yes," repeated Mrs. Worfolk. John saw the beech-woods round Ambles blasted by keeper's disapproval.

"You wouldn't care to—er—come down and g round yourself, Mrs. Worfolk? My sister, Mrs. Cu"

"Oh, I should prefer not to intrude in any way, if you insist, why, of course . . ."

"Oh, no, I don't insist," John hurriedly interpose

"No, sir. Well, we shall all have to get used to being left alone nowadays, and that's all there is to it."

"But I shall be back in a few days, Mrs. Worfolk. I'm a Cockney at heart, you know. Just at first . . ."

Mrs. Worfolk shook her head and waddled tragically to the door.

"There's nothing else you'll be wanting this morning, sir?" she turned to ask in accents that seemed to convey forgiveness of her master in spite of everything.

"No thank you, Mrs. Worfolk. Please send Maud up to help me pack. Good heavens," he added to himself when his housekeeper had left the room, "why shouldn't I be allowed a country house? I suppose the next thing is that James and Beatrice and George and Eleanor will all be offended because I didn't go tearing round to see them the moment I arrived. One's relations never understand that after the production of a play one requires a little rest. Besides, I *must* get on with my new play. I absolutely *must*."

John's tendency to abhor the vacuum of success was corrected by the arrival of Maud the parlour-maid, whose statuesque anæmia and impersonal neatness put something in it. Before leaving for America he had supplemented the rather hasty preliminary furnishing of his new house by ordering from his tailor a variety of country costumes. These Maud, with feminine intuition superimposed on what she would have called her 'understanding of valeting,' at once produced for his visit to Ambles; John in the prospect of half a dozen unworn peat-perfumed suits of tweed flung behind him any lingering doubt about there being something in success, and with the recapture of his enthusiasm for what he called 'jolly things' was anxious that Maud should share in it.

"Do you think these new suits are a success, Maud?" he asked, perhaps a little too boisterously. At any rate, the parlour-maid's comprehension of valeting had apparently never been so widely stretched, for a faint coralline blush tinted her waxen cheeks.

"They seem very nice, sir," she murmured with a slight stress upon the verb.

John felt that he had trespassed too far upon the confines

## *Poor Relations*

of Maud's humanity and retreated hurriedly. He liked to explain that his enquiry had merely been into abstract æsthetics and that he had not had intention of extracting her opinion about these, but he felt that an attempt at explanation was useless, and he hummed instead over a selection of + hums from flower to flower in a garden, careless of who close at hand is potting up plants.

"I will take these ties," he announced on the 1  
*A Fine Old English Gentleman.*

Maud noted them gravely.

"And I shall have a few books. Perhaps the room for them?"

"There won't be room for them not in your room, sir."

"Oh, I know there won't be room in that," said Maud.

"There's the basket what we were going to use for the cat, sir."

"No, I should prefer a brown paper parcel," he decided. It would be improper for the books out of which the historical trappings of his Joan of Arc were to be manufactured to travel in a lying-in hospital for cats.

John left Maud to finish the packing and went downstairs to his library. This double-room of fine proportions was, as one might expect from the library of a popular writer, the core—the veritable omphalos of the house; with its fluted pilasters, cream-coloured panels and cherub-haunted ceiling, the expanse of city and sky visible from three sedate windows at the south end and the glimpse of a busy Hampstead street caught from those facing north, not to speak of the prismatic rows of books, it was a room worthy of art's most remunerative triumphs, the nursery of inspiration, and save for a slight suggestion that the Muses sometimes drank afternoon tea there the room of an indomitable bachelor. When John stepped upon the wreaths, ribbons, and full-blown roses of the threadbare Aubusson rug that floated like gossamer upon a green carpet of Axminster pile as soft as some historic lawn, he was sure that success was not a vacuum. In his now optimistic mood he hoped ultimately to receive from Ambles the kind of congratulatory benediction that the library at Church Row always bestowed upon his footsteps. Indeed, if he had not had such an ambition for his country house, he could scarcely have endured to quit even for a week this library, where fires were burning in two grates and where the smoke of his Partaga swung its lazy hammocks upon the imperturbable air. John possessed another library at Ambles, but he had not yet had leisure to do more than stock it hurriedly with the standard works that he felt no country house should be without. His library in London was the outcome of historical research preparatory to writing his romantic plays; and since all works of popular historical interest are bound with a much more lavish profusion of colour and ornament even than the works of fiction to which they most nearly approximate, John's shelves outwardly resembled rather a collection of armour than a collection of books. There were, of course, many books the insides

## Poor Relations

of which were sufficiently valuable to excuse the inferior; but none of these occupied the line, whether romance of exiled queens, confession after confession, morganatic wives, memoir after memoir from abeyant stairs, together with catchpenny alliterative gallant rude regents and libidinous landgraves flashed in superficiality of gilt and text. In order to amass the material for a play about Joan of Arc the author did himself with original documents. He assumed, perhaps, that a Camembert cheese is more palatable and more portable than a herd of unmilked cows. To drama of Joan of Arc he took from his shelves *Saints of the Fifteenth Century* . . . but a catalogue is enough that when the heap of volumes chosen stood on the desk it glittered like the Maid herself before the gates of Orleans.

"After all," as John had once pointed out in a moment of exasperation to his brother James the critic, "I didn't sit all day in the reading-room of the British Museum."

An hour later the playwright equipped alike for rambles and poetic excursions was sitting in a first-class compartment of a London and South-Western railway train, hours after that he was sitting in the Wrotesford station along between high hazel hedges of golden-brown.

"I shall have to see about getting a dog-cart," he said when after a five minutes' struggle to let down the door with the aid of a strap that looked like an Anglican's sash he succeeded in opening the door and nearly falling into the lane.

"You have to let down the window *before* you get out," said the driver reproachfully, trying to hammer the window back into place and making such a noise about it that John could not bear to accentuate by argument that he was offering to this morning of exquisite weather which earth seemed to be floating away into a wind like one of her own dead leaves. No, on such a matter of controversy was impossible, but he should certainly take steps to acquire a dog-cart.

"For it's like being jolted in a badly made coffin," he said.



when he was once more encased in the fly and, having left the high road behind, was driving under an avenue of sycamores bordered by a small stream, the water of which was stained to the colour of sherry by the sunlight glowing down through the arches of tawny leaves overhead. To John this avenue always seemed the entrance to a vast park surrounding his country house; it was indeed an almost unfrequented road, grass-grown in the centre and lively with rabbits during most of the day, so that his imagination of ancestral approaches was easily stimulated, and he felt like a figure in a painting by Marcus Stone. It was lucky that John's sanguine imagination could so often satisfy his ambition; prosperous playwright though he was, he had not yet made nearly enough money to buy a real park. However, in his present character of an eighteenth-century squire he determined, should the film version of *The Fall of Babylon* turn out successful, to buy a lawny meadow of twenty acres that would add much to the dignity and seclusion of Ambles, the boundaries of which at the back were now overlooked by a herd of fierce Kerry cows who occupied the meadow and during the summer had made John's practice-shots with a brassy too much like big-game shooting to be pleasant or safe. After about a mile the avenue came to an end where a narrow curved bridge spanned the stream, which now flowed away to the left along the bottom of a densely wooded hillside. The fly crossed over with an impunity that was surprising in face of a printed warning that extraordinary vehicles should avoid this bridge, and began to climb the slope by a wide diagonal track between bushes of holly, the green of which seemed vivid and glossy against the prevailing brown. The noise of the wheels was deadened by the heavy drift of beech leaves, and the stillness of this russet world except for the occasional scream of a jay or the flapping of disturbed pigeons demanded from John's illustrative fancy something more remote and Gothic than the eighteenth century.

"Malory," he said to himself. "Absolute Malory. It's almost impossible not to believe that Sir Gawaine might not come galloping down through this wood."

Eager to put himself still more deeply in accord with the

## Poor Relations

romantic atmosphere, John tried this time to open the fly with the intention of walking meditatively down the hill in its wake; the door remained fast; but he opened the window, or rather he broke it.

"I've a jolly good mind to get a motor," he savagely.

Every knight-errant's horse in the neighbourhood had the thought, and by the time John had reached the hill and emerged upon a wide stretch of common land with ancient hawthorns in full crimson berry he was in the present. For there on the other side of the flanked by shelving woods of oak and beech and rising downs on which a milky sky ruffled its breast like a swan lazily floating, stood Ambles, a solitary, Elizabethan house with dreaming chimney-stacks and mossy roofs and garden walls rising from the heaped of innumerable Michaelmas daisies.

"My house," John murmured in a paroxysm of or-

The noise of the approaching fly had drawn the figures to the gate; John, who had gratified affection, and ostentation by sending a wireless message from *mania*, a telegram from Liverpool yesterday, and another to Euston last night to announce his swift arrival, had only himself to thank for perceiving in the group the figure of his brother-in-law, the Reverend Laurence A. He drove away the scarcely formed feeling of depression, supposing that Edith could not by herself have tramped the barrel-shaped vicarage pony all the way from Newton to Ambles, and finding that the left-hand door of the unexpectedly susceptible to the prompting of its har- alighted with such rapidity that not one of his anticipations could have had any impression but that he was to greet them. The two sisters were so conscious of the unmarried brother's impulsive advance that each found her own child to responsive bounds so that they might be half-way along the path to the front door in the garden which Grandmama (whose morning tea had been interrupted by a sudden immersion in two shawls and a quilt) Emily, the maid from London, seeing as Edith and

when he was once more encased in the fly and, having left the high road behind, was driving under an avenue of sycamores bordered by a small stream, the water of which was stained to the colour of sherry by the sunlight glowing down through the arches of tawny leaves overhead. To John this avenue always seemed the entrance to a vast park surrounding his country house; it was indeed an almost unfrequented road, grass-grown in the centre and lively with rabbits during most of the day, so that his imagination of ancestral approaches was easily stimulated, and he felt like a figure in a painting by Marcus Stone. It was lucky that John's sanguine imagination could so often satisfy his ambition; prosperous playwright though he was, he had not yet made nearly enough money to buy a real park. However, in his present character of an eighteenth-century squire he determined, should the film version of *The Fall of Babylon* turn out successful, to buy a lawny meadow of twenty acres that would add much to the dignity and seclusion of Ambles, the boundaries of which at the back were now overlooked by a herd of fierce Kerry cows who occupied the meadow and during the summer had made John's practice-shots with a brassy too much like big-game shooting to be pleasant or safe. After about a mile the avenue came to an end where a narrow curved bridge spanned the stream, which now flowed away to the left along the bottom of a densely wooded hillside. The fly crossed over with an impunity that was surprising in face of a printed warning that extraordinary vehicles should avoid this bridge, and began to climb the slope by a wide diagonal track between bushes of holly, the green of which seemed vivid and glossy against the prevailing brown. The noise of the wheels was deadened by the heavy drift of beech leaves, and the stillness of this russet world except for the occasional scream of a jay or the flapping of disturbed pigeons demanded from John's illustrative fancy something more remote and Gothic than the eighteenth century.

"Malory," he said to himself. "Absolute Malory. It's most impossible not to believe that Sir Gawaine might not come galloping down through this wood."

Eager to put himself still more deeply in accord with

## Poor Relations

romantic atmosphere, John tried this time to open the fly with the intention of walking meditatively hill in its wake ; the door remained fast ; but he opened the window, or rather he broke it.

"I've a jolly good mind to get a motor," he savagely.

Every knight-errant's horse in the neighbourhood took the thought, and by the time John had reached the hill and emerged upon a wide stretch of common land with ancient hawthorns in full crimson berry he was in the present. For there on the other side of the flanked by shelving woods of oak and beech and rising downs on which a milky sky ruffled its breast a swan lazily floating, stood Ambles, a solitary, Elizabethan house with dreaming chimney-stacks and mossy roofs and garden walls rising from the heaped of innumerable Michaelmas daisies.

"My house," John murmured in a paroxysm of

The noise of the approaching fly had drawn figures to the gate ; John, who had gratified affection, and ostentation by sending a wireless message from *mania*, a telegram from Liverpool yesterday, and another to Euston last night to announce his swift arrival, had only himself to thank for perceiving in the group figure of his brother-in-law, the Reverend Laurence A. He drove away the scarcely formed feeling of depression supposing that Edith could not by herself have traversed the barrel-shaped vicarage pony all the way from Newton to Ambles, and finding that the left-hand door of the unexpectedly susceptible to the prompting of its ha alighted with such rapidity that not one of his smiles could have had any impression but that he was bound to greet them. The two sisters were so conscious of the unmarried brother's impulsive advance that each inclined their own child to responsive bounds so that they might meet half-way along the path to the front door, in the hall in which Grandmama (whose morning nap had been interrupted by a sudden immersion in two shawls, and a rapid visit to Emily, the maid from London, acting as lifebuoy do

billowy passages and stairs of the old house) rocked in breathless anticipation of the filial salute.

"Welcome back, my dear Johnnie," the old lady panted.

"How are you, mother? What, another new cap?"

Old Mrs. Touchwood patted her head complacently.

"We bought it at Threadgale's in Galton. The ribbons are the new hollyhock red."

"Delightful!" John exclaimed. "And who helped you to choose it? Little Frida here?"

"Nobody *helped* me, Johnnie. Hilda accompanied me into Galton; but she wanted to buy a sardine-opener for the house."

John had not for a moment imagined that his mother had required any advice about a cap; but inasmuch as Frida, in what was intended to be a demonstrative welcome, prompted by her mother was rubbing her head against his ribs like a calf against a fence, he had felt he ought to hook her to the conversation somehow. John's concern about Frida was solved by the others' gathering round him for greetings.

First Hilda offered her sallow cheek, patting while he kissed it her brother on the back with one hand, and with the other manipulating Harold in such a way as to give John the impression that his nephew was being forced into his waistcoat pocket.

"He feels *you're* his father now," whispered Hilda with a look that was meant to express the tender resignation of widowhood, but which only succeeded in suggesting a covetous maternity. John doubted if Harold felt anything but a desire to escape from being sandwiched between his mother's crape and his uncle's watch-chain, and he turned to embrace Edith, whose cheeks soft and pink as a toy balloon were floating tremulously expectant upon the glinting autumn air.

"We've been so anxious about you," Edith murmured. "And Laurence has such a lot to talk over with you."

John, with a slight sinking that was not altogether due to its being past his usual luncheon hour, turned to be welcomed by his brother-in-law.

The serenity of the vicar of Newton Candovers if he had not been a tall and handsome man might have been mistaken for

## Poor Relations

smugness; as it was, his personality enveloped a ceremonious dignity that was not less than arch except for his comparative youthfulness (he was as John) might well have been considered as

"Edith has been anxious about you. Indeed, been anxious about you," he intoned, offering brother-in-law, for whom the sweet damp odour became a whiff of pious women's veils, while the ing gently down from the tulip tree in the middle. lispd like the India-paper of prayer-books.

"I've got an air-gun, Uncle John," ejaculated having for some time been inhaling the necessary expelled the sentence in a burst as if he had himself. John hailed the announcement almost reached him with the kind of relief with which he had heard the number of the final hymn announced a robin piping his delicate tune from the garden welcome as birdsong in a churchyard had been on the Sundays handicapped by the litany.

"Would you like to see me shoot at something went on, hastily cramming his mouth with slugs.

"Not now, dear," said Hilda hastily. "Uncle John. And don't eat sweets just before lunch."

"Well, it wouldn't tire him to see me shoot at. And I'm not eating sweets. I'm getting ready to

"Let the poor child shoot if he wants to," put in.

Harold beamed ferociously through his spectacles, a slug from his mouth, fitted it into the air-gun, and falling down two leaves from an espalier pear. Edith applauded him, because everybody felt glad that it been a window or perhaps even himself; the robin flew tail contemptuously and flew away.

"And now I must go and get ready for lunch," said who thought a second shot might be less innocuous, and moreover really hungry. His bedroom dimly-draped pleasant rustic simplicity, but he decided that it wanted in: the atmosphere at present was too much that of a recommended country inn.

"Yes, it wants living in," said John to himself: "I shall put in a good month here and break the back of Joan of Arc."

"What skin is this, Uncle John?" a serious voice at his elbow enquired. John started; he had not observed Harold's scout-like entrance.

"What skin is that, my boy?" he repeated in what he thought was the right tone of avuncular jocularly and looking down at Harold, who was examining with myopic intensity the dressing-case. "That is the skin of a white elephant."

"But it's brown," Harold objected.

John rashly decided to extend his facetiousness.

"Yes, well, white elephants turn brown when they're shot, just as lobsters turn red when they're boiled."

"Who shot it?"

"Oh, I don't know—probably some friend of the gentleman who keeps the shop where I bought it."

"When?"

"Well, I can't exactly say when—but probably about three years ago."

"Father used to shoot elephants, didn't he?"

"Yes, my boy, your father used to shoot elephants."

"Perhaps he shot this one."

"Perhaps he did."

"Was he a friend of the gentleman who kept the shop where you bought it?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said John.

"Wouldn't you?" retorted Harold sceptically. "My father was an asplorer. When I'm big I'm going to be an asplorer too; but I shan't be friends with shopkeepers."

"Confounded little snob," John thought, and began to look for his nailbrush, the address of whose palatial residence of pigskin only Maud knew.

"What are you looking for, Uncle John?" his nephew asked.

"I'm looking for my nailbrush, Harold."

"Why?"

"To clean my nails."

"Are they dirty?"

"Well, they're just a little grubby after the railway journey."

"Mine aren't," Harold affirmed in a lofty tone. Then after.

## Poor Relations

a minute he added: "I thought perhaps you were the present you brought me from America."

John turned pale and made up his mind to creep after lunch into the market-town of Galton and toyshop. It would be an infernal nuisance, but it right for omitting to bring presents either for his his niece.

"You're too smart," he said nervously to Harold. time will be after tea." The sentence sounded somehow, and he changed it to "the time for pres. five o'clock."

"Why?" Harold asked.

John was saved from answering by a tap at the door by the entrance of Mrs. Curtis.

"Oh, Harold's with you?" she exclaimed, as if in most surprising juxtaposition in the world.

"Yes, Harold's with me," John agreed.

"You mustn't let him bother you, but he's been forward to your arrival. When is Uncle coming asking?"

"Did he ask *why* I was coming?"

Hilda looked at her brother blankly, and John made mind to try that look on Harold some time.

"Have you got everything you want?" she asked.

"He hasn't got his nailbrush," said Harold.

Hilda assumed an expression of exaggerated alarm.

"Oh dear, I hope it hasn't been lost."

"No, no, no, it'll turn up in one of the glass boxes just telling Harold that I haven't really begun my shopping yet."

"Uncle John's brought me a present from America," proclaimed in accents of greedy pride.

Hilda seized her brother's hand affectionately.

"Now you oughtn't to have done that. It's spoilt. It really is. Harold never expects presents."

"What a liar," thought John. "But not a bigger liar than I am myself," he supplemented, and then he announced that he must go into Galton after lunch and send off an instant telegram to his agent.



"Yes, it wants living in," said John to himself: "I shall put in a good month here and break the back of Joan of Arc."  
 "What skin is this, Uncle John?" a serious voice at his elbow enquired. John started; he had not observed Harold's scout-like entrance.

"What skin is that, my boy?" he repeated in what he thought was the right tone of avuncular jocularitv and looking down at Harold, who was examining with myopic intensity the dressing-case. "That is the skin of a white elephant."

"But it's brown," Harold objected.

John rashly decided to extend his facetiousness.

"Yes, well, white elephants turn brown when they're shot, just as lobsters turn red when they're boiled."

"Who shot it?"

"Oh, I don't know—probably some friend of the gentleman who keeps the shop where I bought it."

"When?"

"Well, I can't exactly say when—but probably about three years ago."

"Father used to shoot elephants, didn't he?"

"Yes, my boy, your father used to shoot elephants."

"Perhaps he shot this one."

"Perhaps he did."

"Was he a friend of the gentleman who kept the shop where you bought it?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said John.

"Wouldn't you?" retorted Harold sceptically. "My father was an asplorer. When I'm big I'm going to be an asplorer too; but I shan't be friends with shopkeepers."

"Confounded little snob," John thought, and began to look for his nailbrush, the address of whose palatial residence of pigskin only Maud knew.

"What are you looking for, Uncle John?" his nephew asked.

"I'm looking for my nailbrush, Harold."

"Why?"

"To clean my nails."

"Are they dirty?"

"Well, they're just a little grubby after the railway journey."

"Mine aren't," Harold affirmed in a lofty tone. Then after

## Poor Relations

a minute he added: "I thought perhaps you were the present you brought me from America."

John turned pale and made up his mind to creep after lunch into the market-town of Galton and vi toyshop. It would be an infernal nuisance, but it is right for omitting to bring presents either for his his niece.

"You're too smart," he said nervously to Harold. time will be after tea." The sentence sounded co somehow, and he changed it to "the time for pres five o'clock."

"Why?" Harold asked.

John was saved from answering by a tap at the do by the entrance of Mrs. Curtis.

"Oh, Harold's with you?" she exclaimed, as if most surprising juxtaposition in the world.

"Yes, Harold's with me," John agreed.

"You mustn't let him bother you, but he's be forward to your arrival. *When* is Uncle comin asking?"

"Did he ask *why* I was coming?"

Hilda looked at her brother blankly, and John mind to try that look on Harold some time.

"Have you got everything you want?" she asked.

"He hasn't got his nailbrush," said Harold.

Hilda assumed an expression of exaggerated ala

"Oh dear, I hope it hasn't been lost."

"No, no, no, it'll turn 'up in one of the glass bo just telling Harold that I haven't really begun y yet."

"Uncle John's brought me a present from Ameri proclaimed in accents of greedy pride.

Hilda seized her brother's hand affectionately.

"Now you oughtn't to have done that. It's f It really is. Harold never expects presents."

"What a liar," thought John. "But not a bigg I am myself," he supplemented, and then he that he must go into Galton af ch and send o tant telegram to his :

"I wonder . . ." Hilda began, but with an arch look she paused and seemed to thrust aside temptation.

"What?" John weakly asked.

"Why . . . but no, he might bore you by walking too slowly. Harold," she added seriously, "if Uncle John is kind enough to take you into Galton with him, will you be a good boy and leave your butterfly-net at home?"

"If I may take my air-gun," Harold agreed.

John rapidly went over in his mind the various places where Harold might be successfully detained while he was in the toy-shop, decided that the risk would be too great, pulled himself together, and declined the pleasure of his nephew's company on the ground that he must think over very carefully the phrasing of the telegram he had to send, a mental process, he explained, that Harold might distract.

"Another day, darling," said Hilda consolingly.

"And then I'll be able to take my fishing-rod," said Harold.

"He is so like his poor father," Hilda murmured.

John was thinking sympathetically of the distant Amazonian tribe that had murdered Daniel Curtis, when there was another tap at the door, and Frida crackling loudly in a clean pinafore came in to say that the bell for lunch was just going to ring.

"Yes, dear," said her aunt. "Uncle John knows already. Don't bother him now. He's tired after his journey. Come along, Harold."

"He can have my nailbrush if he likes," Harold offered.

"Run, darling, and get it quickly then."

Harold rushed out of the room and could be heard hustling his cousin all down the corridor, evoking complaints of 'Don't, Harold, you rough boy, you're crumpling my frock.'

The bell for lunch sounded gratefully at this moment, and John without even washing his hands hurried downstairs trying to look like a hungry ogre, so anxious was he to avoid using Harold's nailbrush.

The dining-room at Ambles was a long low room with a large open fireplace and panelled walls; from the window-seats bundles of drying lavender competed pleasantly with the smell of hot kidney-beans upon the table, at the head of which

## Poor Relations

John took his rightful place; opposite to him, untouched pudding, sat Grandmama. Laurence without being invited, after standing up for a moment, expression of pained interrogation; Edith accords words by making with her forefinger and thumb a cruciform incision between two of the bones of her hand. She inclined her head solemnly toward Frida in a mute appeal to follow her mother's example; Harold flashed his eyes upon every dish in turn; Emily's waiting was dignified, of reunion coloured with human affection.

"Well, I'm glad to be back in England," heartily.

An encouraging murmur rippled round the table relations.

"Are these French beans from our own garden presently.

"Scarlet-runners," Hilda corrected. "Yes, of never trouble the greengrocer. The frosts bring them to light. . . ."

"I haven't got a bean left," said Laurence.

John nearly gave a visible jump; there was something terribly suggestive in that simple horticultural discovery.

"Our beans are quite over," added Edith in a voice of one who has tumbled upon a secret of which she had a habit of echoing many of her husband's. This, though she seldom repeated them literally, not immediately. Sometimes indeed she waited as long as half an hour before she reissued in the form of a personal philosophic discovery or of an exegetical interpretation of the most casual remark of Laurence, a habit which irritated and embarrassed other people, who would look at Edith and mutter a hurried agreement or ask for it to be passed.

"I remember," said old Mrs. Touchwood, "that it was a favourite dish of poor Papa, though I myself always preferred better."

"I like peas," Harold proclaimed.

"I like peas too," cried Frida excitedly.

"Frida," said her father, pulling out with a click of his chair.



## Poor Relations

John took his rightful place; opposite to him, untouched pudding, sat Grandmama. Laurence, without being invited, after standing up for a moment, expression of pained interrogation; Edith accompanied her words by making with her forefinger and thumb a cruciform incision between two of the bones of her hand, inclined her head solemnly toward Frida in a mute appeal to follow her mother's example; Harold flashed his eyes upon every dish in turn; Emily's waiting was during the whole of reünion coloured with human affection.

"Well, I'm glad to be back in England," said Laurence heartily.

An encouraging murmur rippled round the table.

"Are these French beans from our own garden presently?"

"Scarlet-runners," Hilda corrected. "Yes, of course, never trouble the greengrocer. The frosts have been light. . . ."

"I haven't got a bean left," said Laurence.

John nearly gave a visible jump; there was something terribly suggestive in that simple horticultural discovery.

"Our beans are quite over," added Edith in a voice of one who has tumbled upon a secret of which she had a habit of echoing many of her husband's. This, though she seldom repeated them literally, not immediately. Sometimes indeed she would wait as long as half an hour before she reissued in a personal philosophic discovery or of an exegetical remark of Laurence, a habit which embarrassed other people, who would look at Edith and mutter a hurried agreement or ask her to be passed.

"I remember," said old Mrs. Touchwood, "that it was a favourite dish of poor Papa, though I myself am not better."

"I like peas," Harold proclaimed.

"I like peas too," cried Frida excitedly.

"Frida," said her father, pulling out with a



## *Poor Relations*

John took his rightful place; opposite to him, untouched pudding, sat Grandmama. Laurence without being invited, after standing up for a moment expression of pained interrogation; Edith answered words by making with her forefinger and thumb cruciform incision between two of the bones of her hand, inclined her head solemnly toward Frida in a mute appeal to follow her mother's example; Harold flashed his eyes upon every dish in turn; Emily's waiting was full of reünion coloured with human affection.

"Well, I'm glad to be back in England," said Laurence heartily.

An encouraging murmur rippled round the table relations.

"Are these French beans from our own garden presently?"

"Scarlet-runners," Hilda corrected. "Yes, of course, never trouble the greengrocer. The frosts have brought them to light."

"I haven't got a bean left," said Laurence.

John nearly gave a visible jump; there was something terribly suggestive in that simple horticultural discovery.

"Our beans are quite over," added Edith in a low voice of one who has tumbled upon a secret of which she had a habit of echoing many of her husband's sayings, though she seldom repeated them literally, not immediately. Sometimes indeed she would wait long as half an hour before she reissued in the form of a personal philosophic discovery or of an exegetical remark of Laurence, a habit which irritated and embarrassed other people, who would look at Edith and mutter a hurried agreement or ask her to be passed.

"I remember," said old Mrs. Touchwood, "that was a favourite dish of poor Papa, though I myself always preferred better."

"I like peas," Harold proclaimed.

"I like peas too," cried Frida excitedly.

"Frida," said her father, pulling out with a click





## Poor Relations

John took his rightful place; opposite to him, untouched pudding, sat Grandmama. Laurence without being invited, after standing up for a moment, expression of pained interrogation; Edith accords words by making with her forefinger and thumb a cruciform incision between two of the bones of the mutton, inclined her head solemnly toward Frida in a mute appeal to follow her mother's example; Harold flashed his eyes upon every dish in turn; Emily's waiting was dainty and of reunion coloured with human affection.

"Well, I'm glad to be back in England," said Edith heartily.

An encouraging murmur rippled round the table, and the relations.

"Are these French beans from our own garden presently?"

"Scarlet-runners," Hilda corrected. "Yes, of course, never trouble the greengrocer. The frosts have brought them to light. . . ."

"I haven't got a bean left," said Laurence.

John nearly gave a visible jump; there was something terribly suggestive in that simple horticultural discovery.

"Our beans are quite over," added Edith in a low voice of one who has tumbled upon a secret of which she had a habit of echoing many of her husband's remarks, this, though she seldom repeated them literally, but not immediately. Sometimes indeed she would wait as long as half an hour before she reissued in the same personal philosophic discovery or of an exegetical interpretation of the most casual remark of Laurence, a habit which embarrassed other people, who would look at her and Edith and mutter a hurried agreement or ask for it to be passed.

"I remember," said old Mrs. Touchwood, "that this was a favourite dish of poor Papa, though I myself never liked it better."

"I like peas," Harold proclaimed.

"I like peas too," cried Frida excitedly.

"Frida," said her father, pulling out with a sigh.

"I wonder . . ." Hilda began, but with an arch look she paused and seemed to thrust aside temptation.

"What?" John weakly asked.

"Why . . . but no, he might bore you by walking too slowly. Harold," she added seriously, "if Uncle John is kind enough to take you into Galton with him, will you be a good boy and leave your butterfly-net at home?"

"If I may take my air-gun," Harold agreed.

John rapidly went over in his mind the various places where Harold might be successfully detained while he was in the toy-shop, decided that the risk would be too great, pulled himself together, and declined the pleasure of his nephew's company on the ground that he must think over very carefully the phrasing of the telegram he had to send, a mental process, he explained, that Harold might distract.

"Another day, darling," said Hilda consolingly.

"And then I'll be able to take my fishing-rod," said Harold.

"He is so like his poor father," Hilda murmured.

John was thinking sympathetically of the distant Amazonian tribe that had murdered Daniel Curtis, when there was another tap at the door, and Frida crackling loudly in a clean pinafore came in to say that the bell for lunch was just going to ring.

"Yes, dear," said her aunt. "Uncle John knows already. Don't bother him now. He's tired after his journey. Come along, Harold."

"He can have my nailbrush if he likes," Harold offered.

"Run, darling, and get it quickly then."

Harold rushed out of the room and could be heard hustling his cousin all down the corridor, evoking complaints of "Don't, Harold, you rough boy, you're crumpling my frock."

The bell for lunch sounded gratefully at this moment, and John without even washing his hands hurried downstairs trying to look like a hungry ogre, so anxious was he to avoid using Harold's nailbrush.

The dining-room at Ambles was a long low room with a large open fireplace and panelled walls; from the window-seats bundles of drying lavender competed pleasantly with the smell of hot kidney-beans upon the table, at the head of which

## Poor Relations

John took his rightful place; opposite to him, untouched pudding, sat Grandmama. Laurence, without being invited, after standing up for a moment, expression of pained interrogation; Edith accompanied her words by making with her forefinger and thumb a cruciform incision between two of the bones of her hand. She inclined her head solemnly toward Frida in a mute appeal to follow her mother's example; Harold flashed his eyes upon every dish in turn; Emily's waiting was dulled by the prospect of reunion coloured with human affection.

"Well, I'm glad to be back in England," said Laurence heartily.

An encouraging murmur rippled round the table.

"Are these French beans from our own garden presently?"

"Scarlet-runners," Hilda corrected. "Yes, of course, but they never trouble the greengrocer. The frosts have been light. . . ."

"I haven't got a bean left," said Laurence.

John nearly gave a visible jump; there was something terribly suggestive in that simple horticultural discovery.

"Our beans are quite over," added Edith in a voice of one who has tumbled upon a secret of which she had a habit of echoing many of her husband's. This, though she seldom repeated them literally, was not immediately. Sometimes indeed she would wait as long as half an hour before she reissued in the same personal philosophic discovery or of an exegetical interpretation of the most casual remark of Laurence, a habit which embarrassed other people, who would look at Edith and mutter a hurried agreement or assent to be passed.

"I remember," said old Mrs. Touchwood, "that was a favourite dish of poor Papa, though I myself liked it better."

"I like peas," Harold proclaimed.

"I like peas too," cried Frida excitedly.

"Frida," said her father, pulling out a chair, "sit down."

graver tenor stops in his voice, "we do not talk at table about our likes and dislikes."

Edith endorsed this opinion with a grave nod at Frida, or rather with a solemn inclination of the head as if she were bowing to an altar.

"But I like new potatoes best of all," continued Harold. "My gosh, all buttery!"

Laurence screwed up his eyes in a disgusted wince, looked down his nose at his plate, and drew a shocked cork from his throat.

"Hush," said Hilda. "Didn't you hear what Uncle Laurence said, darling?"

She spoke as one speaks to children in church when the organ begins; one felt that she was inspired by social tact rather than by any real reverence for the clergyman.

"Well, I do like new potatoes, and I like asparagus."

Frida was just going to declare for asparagus too, when she caught her father's eye and choked.

"Evidently the vegetable that Frida likes best," said John, riding buoyantly upon the gale of Frida's convulsions, "is an artichoke."

It is perhaps lucky for professional comedians that judges and rich uncles rarely go on the stage; their occupation might be even more arduous if they had to face such competitors. Anyway, John had enough success with his joke to feel much more hopeful of being able to find suitable presents in Galton for Harold and Frida; and in the silence of exhaustion that succeeded the laughter he broke the news of his having to go into town and despatch an urgent telegram that very afternoon, mentioning incidentally that he might see about a dog-cart, and of course at the same time a horse. Everybody applauded his resolve except his brother-in-law, who looked distinctly put out.

"But you won't be gone before I get back?" John asked.

Laurence and Edith exchanged glances fraught with the unuttered solemnities of conjugal comprehension.

"Well, I *had* wanted to have a talk over things with you after lunch," Laurence explained. "In fact I have a good deal

## Poor Relations

to talk over. I should suggest driving you in to G- find it impossible to talk freely while driving. The old pony has been known to shy. Yes, indeed, poor rose often shies."

John mentally blessed the aged animal's youthful said to cover his relief that old maids were often more than young ones.

"Why?" asked Harold.

Everybody felt that Harold's question was one that not be answered.

"You wouldn't understand, darling," said his mother. The dining-room became tense with mystery.

"Of course, if we could have dinner put forward an hour," suggested Laurence, dragging the conversation out of the slough of sex, "we could avail ourselves of the moon."

"Yes, you see," Edith put in eagerly, "it would be dark with the moon."

Laurence knitted his brow at this, and his wife added that an earlier dinner would bring Frida's bedtime nearer to its normal hour.

"The point is that I have a great deal to talk over with John," Laurence irritably explained, "and that," he said as if he would have liked to add "Frida's bedtime and the devil," but he swallowed the impious dedication and crumbled his bread.

Finally, notwithstanding that everybody felt very tired of roast beef and scarlet-runners, it was decided to dine at half-past six instead of half-past seven.

"Poor Papa, I remember," said old Mrs. Toucher, "always liked to dine at half-past three. That gave him a nice long morning for his patients and time to smoke his pipe after dinner before he opened the dispensary in the evening. Supper was generally cold unless he anticipated a night in which case we had soup."

All were glad that the twentieth century had arrived, and they smiled sympathetically at the old lady, who feeling that her anecdote had scored a hit embarked upon another about being taken to the Great Exhibition when she was eleven years old, which lasted right through the puddings.

it was trifle and Harold did not feel inclined to lose a mouthful by rash interruptions.

After lunch John was taken all over the house and all round the garden and congratulated time after time upon the wisdom he had shown in buying Ambles: he was made to feel that property set him apart from other men even more definitely than dramatic success.

"Of course Daniel was famous in his way," Hilda said. "But what did he leave me?"

John, remembering the £120 a year in the bank and the collection of stuffed humming-birds at the pantechicon, the importation of which to Ambles he was always dreading, felt that Hilda was not being ungratefully rhetorical.

"And of course," Laurence contributed, "a vicar feels that his glebe—the value of which by the way has just gone down another £2 an acre—is not his own."

"Yes, you see," Edith put in, "if anything horrid happened to Laurence it would belong to the next vicar."

Again the glances of husband and wife played together in mid-air like butterflies.

"And so," Laurence went on, "when you tell us that you hope to buy this twenty-acre field we all realize that in so doing you would most emphatically be consolidating your property."

"Oh, I'm sure you're wise to buy," said Hilda weightily.

"It would make Ambles so much larger, wouldn't it?" suggested Edith. "Twenty acres, you see . . . well, really, I suppose twenty acres would be as big as from . . ."

"Come, Edith," said her husband. "Don't worry poor John with comparative areas—we are all looking at the twenty-acre field now."

The fierce little Kerry cows eyed the prospective owner peacefully, until Harold hit one of them with a slug from his air-gun, when they all began to career about the field, kicking up their heels and waving their tails.

"Don't do that, my boy," John said crossly—for him very crossly.

A short cut to Galton lay across this field, which John, though even when they were quiet he never felt on really intimate terms with cows, had just decided to follow.

## *Poor Relations*

"Darling, that's such a cruel thing to do," related. "The poor cow wasn't hurting you."

"It was looking at me," Harold protested.

"There is a legend about Francis of Assisi, Uncle Laurence began, "which will interest you same time . . ."

"Sorry to interrupt," John broke in, "but I must along. This telegram. . . . I'll be back for tea. . .

He hurried off, and when everybody called out him of the short cut across the twenty-acre field back cheerfully, as if he thought he was being wise walk; but he took the long way round.

It was a good five miles to Galton in the opposite from the road by which he had driven up that morning on this fine autumn afternoon, going down hill all way through a foreground of golden woods with pale blue distances beyond, John enjoyed the walk, and because even at the beginning of it he stopped once to think how jolly it would be to see Miss Hamilton Merritt coming round the next bend in the road. he did not bother to include Miss Merritt, and discovered his fancy so steadily fixed upon Miss Hamilton he was forced to remind himself that Miss Hamilton setting would demand a much higher standard of than Miss Hamilton on the promenade deck of the . Nevertheless, John continued to think of her; and so did her semblance walk beside him and so exceptive was the afternoon for the season of the year that he strolled along the greater part of the way. At any he saw the tower of Galton church he was shocked that it was already four o'clock.



### Chapter Three

THE selection of presents for children is never easy, because in order to extract real pleasure from the purchase it is necessary to find something that excites the donor as much as it is likely to excite the recipient. In John's case this difficulty was quadrupled by having to find toys with an American air about them, and on top of that by the narrowly restricted choice in the Galton shops. He felt that it would be ridiculous, even insulting, to produce for Frida as typical of New York's luxurious catering for the young that doll, the roses of whose cheeks had withered in the sunlight of five Hampshire summers, and whose smile had failed to allure as little girls those who were now marriageable young women. Nor did he think that Harold would accept as worthy of American enterprise those more conspicuous portions of a diminutive Uhlan's uniform fastened to a dog's-eared sheet of cardboard, the sword belonging to which was rusting in the scabbard and the gilt lancehead of which no longer gave the least illusion of being metal. Finally, however, just as the clock was striking five he unearthed from a remote corner of the large ironmonger's shop, to which he had turned in despair from the toys offered him by the two stationers, a toboggan—and not merely a toboggan, but a Canadian toboggan stamped with the image of a Red Indian.

"It was ordered for a customer in 1895," the ironmonger explained. "There was heavy snow that year, you may remember."

If it had been ordered by Methuselah when he was still in his 'teens John would not have hesitated.

"Well, would you—er—wrap it up," he said, putting down the money.

"Hadn't the carrier better bring it, sir?" suggested the ironmonger. "He'll be going Wrotesford way to-morrow morning."

Obviously John could not carry the toboggan five miles, but just as obviously he must get the toboggan back to Ambles

## Poor Relations

that night: so he declined the carrier, and asked the driver to order him a fly while he made a last desperate dash for Frida's present. In the end, with twilight falling, he bought for his niece twenty-nine small china animals; the stationer assured him would enchant any child under nine and eleven, though they were perhaps less likely to attract the eyes of the children to the window than to the eyes of the adults outside that period. A younger child, for instance, might be tempted to put them in its mouth, even if they were not carefully watched, while an older child might be tempted to play on them. Another advantage was that when the child for whom they were intended grew out of them, they could be put away and revived to adorn her mantelpiece when she had reached an age to appreciate the possibilities of the china piece. John did not feel as happy about these animals as he did about the toboggan: there was not a single buff animal among them, and not one looked in the least distinctively like a reindeer, but the stationer was so reassuring and time was going so rapidly that he decided to risk the purchase. And when they were deposited in a cardboard box among the china animals, they did not look so dull, and perhaps Frida would be surprised to find how many there were before she unpacked them.

"Better than a Noah's Ark," said John hopefully.

"Oh, yes, much better, sir. A much more suitable present for a young lady. In fact Noah's Arks are considered the best for village treats, but they're in very little demand among the gentry nowadays."

When John was within a quarter of a mile from the house, he told the driver of the fly to stop. Somehow he slipped out of the fly into the house and up to his room with the toboggan and the china animals; it was after six, and the children had been looking out for his return since five. Perhaps they would have gone home by now and he should not have been troubled by nocturnal apprehensions by dragging the toboggan across the twenty-acre field. Meanwhile, he should tell the driver to draw the scent and enable him with Emily's help to find his way to the room by the backstairs, unperceived. A heavy mist had fallen over the meadow, and the paper wrapped round the toboggan, which was just too wide to be carried under his arm, lay

folio, began to peel off in the dew with a swishing sound that would inevitably attract the curiosity of the cows, were they still at large; moreover, several of the china animals were now chinking together and, John could not help feeling with some anxiety, probably chipping off their noses.

"I must look like a broken-down Santa Claus with this vehicle," he said to himself. "Where's the path got to now? I wonder why people wiggle so when they make a path? Hullo! What's that?"

The munching of cattle was audible close at hand, a munching that was sometimes interrupted by awful snorts.

"Perhaps it's only the mist that makes them do that," John tried to assure himself. "It seems very imprudent to leave valuable cows out of doors on a damp night like this."

There was a sound of heavy bodies moving suddenly in unison.

"They've heard me," thought John hopelessly. "I wish to goodness I knew something about cows. I really must get the subject up. Of course, they *may* be frightened of *me*. Good heavens, they're all snorting now! Probably the best thing to do is to keep on calmly walking; most animals are susceptible to human indifference. What a little fool that nephew of mine was to shoot at them this afternoon. I'm hanged if he deserves his toboggan."

The lights of Ambles stained the mist in front; John ran the last fifty yards, threw himself over the iron railings, and stood panting upon his own lawn. In the distance could be heard the confused thudding of hooves dying away toward the far end of the twenty-acre meadow.

"I evidently frightened them," he decided.

A few minutes later John was calling down from the landing outside his bedroom that it was time for presents. In the first brief moment of intoxication that had succeeded his defeat of the cattle he had seriously contemplated tobogganing downstairs himself in order to surprise the kids, as he put it. But when he reached the head of the stairs, they looked all wrong for such an experiment, and he walked the toboggan down, which lamplight appeared to him a typical product of the bear-haunted mountains of Canada.

## Poor Relations

Everybody was waiting for him in the day, everybody was flatteringly enthusiastic about the and seemed anxious to make it at home in such surroundings; nobody failed to point out to the luck extreme kindness of his uncle in bringing back such a present all the way from America—indeed one's impression that John must often have had to wake up it in the night.

"The trouble you must have taken," Hilda said.

"Yes, I did take a good deal of trouble," John said. "After all, so he had—a damned sight more trouble than one there suspected."

"When will it snow?" Harold asked. "To-morrow."

"I hope not—I mean, it might," said John. He picked up Harold's spirits, if only to balance Frida's depression, whose present he was beginning to feel very doubtful about. He saw her eyes glittering with feverish anticipation while undoing the string. He hoped she would not faint with disappointment when it was opened, and he took the lid of the box with the kind of flourish to which waiters treat dish-covers when they desire to promote an air among the guests.

"How sweet," Edith murmured.

John looked gratefully at his sister; if he had married that night she would have inherited Ambles.

"Ah, a collection of small china animals," said Edith, choosing a cat to set delicately upon the table for admiration. John wished he had not chosen the box, which seemed to suffer with a tumour in the region of the lid, disinclined in consequence to sit still.

"Yes, I was anxious to get her a Noah's Ark," John teased, seeming to suggest by his tone how appropriate a gift would have been to the atmosphere of a vicarage. "They've practically given up making Noah's Arks in England, and you see, these china animals will serve as toys now, and when Frida is grown up, they'll look jolly on the mantelpiece. Those that are not broken, of course."

The animals had all been taken out of their box by John, but a few paws and ears were still adhering to the cotton-wool.

"Frida is always very light on her toys," Edith murmured with gentle pride.

"Not likely to put them in her mouth," said John heartily. "That was the only thing that made me hesitate when I first saw them in Fifth Avenue. But they don't look quite so edible here."

"Frida never puts anything in her mouth," Edith generalized primly. "And she's given up biting her nails since Uncle John came home, haven't you, dear?"

"That's a good girl," John applauded; although he did not believe in Frida's sudden conquest of autophagy, he was anxious to encourage her in every way at the moment.

Yes, the gift-horses had shown off their paces better than he had expected, he decided. To be sure, Frida did not appear beside herself with joy, but at any rate she had not burst into tears—she had not thrust the present from her sight with loathing and begged to be taken home. And then Harold, who had been staring at the animals through his glasses, like the horrid little naturalist that he was, said:

"I've seen some animals like them in Mr. Goodman's shop."

John hoped a blizzard would blow to-morrow, that Harold would toboggan recklessly down the steepest slope of the downs behind Ambles, and that he would hit an oak tree at the bottom and break his glasses. However, none of these dark thoughts obscured the remote brightness with which he answered:

"Really, Harold. Very likely. There is a considerable exportation of china animals from America nowadays. In fact I was very lucky to find any left in America."

"Let's go into Galton to-morrow and look at Mr. Goodman's animals," Harold suggested.

John had never supposed that one day he should feel grateful to his brother-in-law; but when the dinner-bell went at half-past six instead of half-past seven solely on his account, John felt inclined to shake him by the hand. Nor would he have ever supposed that he should one day welcome the prospect of one of Laurence's long confidential talks. Yet when the ladies departed after dessert and Laurence took the chair next

## *Poor Relations*

to him as solemnly as if it were a faldstool, he encc with a smile.

"We might have our little talk now," and when cleared his throat John felt that the conversation opened as successfully as a local bazaar. Not merely smile encouragingly, but he actually went so far as his brother-in-law to go ahead.

Laurence sighed, and poured himself out a second port.

"I find myself in a position of considerable difficulty announced, "and should like your advice."

John's mind went rapidly to the balance in his instead of to the treasure of worldly experience from might have drawn.

"Perhaps before we begin our little talk," said "it would be as well if I were to remind you of some outstanding events and influences in my life. You be in a better position to give me the advice and the moral help, of which I stand in need—ah need."

"He keeps calling it a little talk," John thought, Jove, it's lucky we did have dinner early. At this rate get back to his vicarage before cock-crow."

John was not deceived by his brother-in-law's of their talk, and he exchanged the trim Henry already clipped for a very large Upman that would s a good hour.

"Won't you light up before you begin?" he asked, a box of commonplace Murillos toward his brother whose habit of biting off the end of a cigar, of letting of continually knocking off the ash, of forgetting to the band till it was smouldering, and of playing miserable tunes with it on the rim of a coffee-cup, in fact of doing thing with it except smoke it appreciatively, made it impossible for John so far as Laurence was concerned to be general his cigars.

"I think you'll find these not bad."

This was true; the Murillos were not actually bad.

"Thanks, I will avail myself of your offer. But

back to what I was saying," Laurence went on, lighting his cigar with as little expression of anticipated pleasure as might be discovered in the countenance of a lodging-house servant lighting a fire. "I do not propose to occupy your time by an account of any spiritual struggles at the University."

"You ought to write a novel," said John cheerfully.

Laurence looked puzzled.

"I am now occupied with the writing of a play, but I shall come to that presently. Novels, however . . ."

"I was only joking," said John. "It would take too long to explain the joke. Sorry I interrupted you. Cigar gone out? Don't take another. It doesn't really matter how often those Murillos go out."

"Where was I?" Laurence asked in a bewildered voice.

"You'd just left Oxford," John answered quickly.

"Ah yes, I was at Oxford. Well, as I was saying, I shall not detain you with an account of my spiritual struggles there . . . I think I may almost without presumption refer to them as my spiritual progress . . . let it suffice that I found myself on the vigil of my ordination after a year at Cuddesdon Theological College a convinced High Churchman. This must not be taken to mean that I belonged to the more advanced or what I should prefer to call the Italian party in the Church of England. I did not."

Laurence here paused and looked at John earnestly; since John had not the remotest idea what the Italian party meant and was anxious to avoid being told, he said in accents that sought to convey relief at hearing his brother-in-law's personal contradiction of a charge that had for long been whispered against him:

"Oh, you didn't?"

"No, I did not. I was not prepared to go one jot or one tittle beyond the Five Points."

"Of the compass, you mean," said John wisely. "Quite so."

Then seeing that Laurence seemed rather indignant, he added quickly, "Did I say the compass? How idiotic! Of course, I meant the law."

"The Five Points are the Eastward Position . . ."

## Poor Relations

"It was the compass after all," John thought. "fool I was to hedge."

"The Mixed Chalice; Lights, Wafer Bread and but *not* the ceremonial use of Incense."

"And those are the Five Points?"

Laurence inclined his head.

"Which you were not prepared to go beyond, said?" John gravely continued, flattering himself he was re-established as an intelligent listener.

"In adhering to these Five Points," Laurence said, "I found that I was able to claim the support of an authoritative English divines. I need only mention Ken and Bishop Andrewes for you to appreciate this."

"Eastward, I think you said," John put in; for his in-law had paused again, and he was evidently intending something.

"I perceive that you are not acquainted with the divergences of opinion that unhappily exist in our Church."

"Well, to tell you the truth—and I know you'll be frankness—I haven't been to church since I was a layman admitted. "But I know I used to dislike the litany and of course I had my favourite hymns—we most of us do—and really I think that's as far as I got. However, I'll pick up the subject of religion very shortly. My next play is with Joan of Arc, and, as you may imagine, religion is an important part in such a theme—a very important addition to the vision that Joan will have of St. Michael in the first act, one of my chief unsympathetic characters, a bishop. I hope I'm not hurting your feelings in this, my dear fellow. Have another cigar, won't you? I think you've dipped the end of that one in the ash."

Laurence assured John bitterly that he had no particular fondness for bishops. "In fact," he went on, "I was having a very painful discussion with the Bishop of London at this moment, but I shall come to that presently. I am anxious, however, to impress upon you at this stage that the little talk is the fact that on the vigil of my ordination



back to what I was saying," Laurence went on, lighting his cigar with as little expression of anticipated pleasure as might be discovered in the countenance of a lodging-house servant lighting a fire. "I do not propose to occupy your time by an account of any spiritual struggles at the University."

"You ought to write a novel," said John cheerfully. Laurence looked puzzled.

"I am now occupied with the writing of a play, but I shall come to that presently. Novels, however . . ."

"I was only joking," said John. "It would take too long to explain the joke. Sorry I interrupted you. Cigar gone out? Don't take another. It doesn't really matter how often those Murillos go out."

"Where was I?" Laurence asked in a bewildered voice.

"You'd just left Oxford," John answered quickly.

"Ah yes, I was at Oxford. Well, as I was saying, I shall not detain you with an account of my spiritual struggles there . . . I think I may almost without presumption refer to them as my spiritual progress . . . let it suffice that I found myself on the vigil of my ordination after a year at Cuddesdon Theological College a convinced High Churchman. This must not be taken to mean that I belonged to the more advanced or what I should prefer to call the Italian party in the Church of England. I did not."

Laurence here paused and looked at John earnestly; since John had not the remotest idea what the Italian party meant and was anxious to avoid being told, he said in accents that sought to convey relief at hearing his brother-in-law's personal contradiction of a charge that had for long been whispered against him:

"Oh, you didn't?"

"No, I did not. I was not prepared to go one jot or one tittle beyond the Five Points."

"Of the compass, you mean," said John wisely. "Quite so."

Then seeing that Laurence seemed rather indignant, he added quickly, "Did I say the compass? How idiotic! Of course, I meant the law."

"The Five Points are the Eastward Position . . ."

## *Poor Relations*

"It was the compass after all," John thought. "fool I was to hedge."

"The Mixed Chalice; Lights, Wafer Bread and V but *not* the ceremonial use of Incense."

"And those are the Five Points?"

Laurence inclined his head.

"Which you were not prepared to go beyond, I said?" John gravely continued, flattering him. He was re-established as an intelligent listener.

"In adhering to these Five Points," Laurence "I found that I was able to claim the support of a authoritative English divines. I need only mention Ken and Bishop Andrewes for you to appreciate tion."

"Eastward, I think you said," John put in; for his in-law had paused again, and he was evidently in something.

"I perceive that you are not acquainted with gences of opinion that unhappily exist in our Church."

"Well, to tell you the truth—and I know your frankness—I haven't been to church since I was admitted. "But I know I used to dislike the litany and of course I had my favourite hymns—we most and really I think that's as far as I got. However, up the subject of religion very shortly. My next p with Joan of Arc, and, as you may imagine, relig important part in such a theme—a very important addition to the vision that Joan will have of St the first act, one of my chief unsympathetic ch bishop. I hope I'm not hurting your feelings. this, my dear fellow. Have another cigar, we think you've dipped the end of that one in the co.

Laurence assured John bitterly that he had no particularly fond of bishops. "In fact," he was having a very painful discussion with the Bishop at this moment, but I shall come to that presently. I am anxious, however, to impress upon you at a little talk is the fact that on the vigil of my ord

arrived at a definite theory of what I could and could not not accept. Well, I was ordained deacon by the Bishop of St. Albans and licensed to a curacy in Plaistow—one of the poorest districts in the East end of London. There I worked for three years, and it was there that fourteen years ago I first met Edith."

"Yes, I seem to remember. Wasn't she working at a girls' club or something? I know I always thought that there must be a secondary attraction."

"At that time my financial position was not such as to warrant my embarking upon matrimony. Moreover, I had in a moment of what I should now call boyish exaltation registered a vow of perpetual celibacy. Edith, however, with that devotion which neither then nor at any crisis since has failed me expressed her willingness to consent to an indefinite engagement, and I remember with gratitude that it was just this consent of hers that was the means of widening the narrow—ah—the all too narrow path which at that time I was treading in religion. My vicar and I had a painful dispute over some insignificant doctrinal point; I felt bound to resign my curacy, and take another under a man who could appreciate and allow for my speculative temperament. I became curate to St. Thomas's, Kensington, and had hopes of ultimately being preferred to a Rving. I realized in fact that the East End was a cul-de-sac for a young and—if I may so describe myself without being misunderstood—ambitious curate. For three years I remained at St. Thomas's and obtained a considerable reputation as a preacher. You may or may not remember that some Advent Addresses of mine were reprinted in one of the more tolerant religious weeklies and obtained what I do not hesitate to call the honour of being singled out for malicious abuse by the *'Church Times'*. Eleven years ago my dear father died and by leaving me an independence of £417 a year enabled me not merely to marry Edith, but very soon afterwards to accept the living of Newton Candover. I will not detain you with the history of my financial losses, which I hope I have always welcomed in the true spirit of resignation. Let it suffice that within a few years owing to my own misplaced charity and some bad advice from a relative

## *Poor Relations*

of mine on the Stock Exchange my private income £152, while at the same time the gross income of Candover from £298 sank to the abominably low of £102—a serious reflection, I think you will agree, on the shocking financial system of our national Church. It surprised you, my dear John, to learn that such blows not only did not cast me down into a state of spirit and intellectual atrophy, but that they actually had the effect of inciting me to still greater efforts.”

John had been fumbling with his cheque book, and had once begun to talk about his income; but the uncertainty of the narrative quietened him, and the Upmanys were well.

"But I don't think I'm a very good person to talk to about these abstruse theological difficulties," John protested. "I really haven't considered the question. I know of course to what you refer, but I think this is essentially an occasion for professional advice."

"I do not ask for advice upon my beliefs," Laurence explained. "I recognize that nobody is able to do anything for them except myself. What I want you to do is to let Edith, myself, and little Frida stay with you at Ambles—of course we should be paying guests and you could use our pony and trap and any of the vicarage furniture that you thought suitable—until it has been decided whether I am likely or not to have any success as a dramatist. I do not ask you to undertake the Quixotic task of trying to obtain a public representation of my play about the apostle Thomas. I know that biblical subjects are forbidden by the Lord Chamberlain—surely a monstrous piece of flunkeyism. But I have many other ideas for plays, and I'm convinced that you will sympathize with my anxiety to be able to work undisturbed and, if I may say so, in close propinquity to another playwright who is already famous."

"But why do you want to leave your own vicarage?" John nearly groaned.

"My dear fellow, owing to what I can only call the poisonous behaviour of Mrs. Paxton, my patron, to whom while still a curate at St. Thomas's, Kensington, I gave an abundance of spiritual consolation when she suffered the loss of her husband, owing as I say to her poisonous behaviour following upon a trifling quarrel about some alterations I made in the fabric of my church without consulting her, I have been subjected to ceaseless inquisition and persecution. There has been an outcry in the more bigoted religious press about my doctrine, and in short I have thought it best and most dignified to resign my living. I am therefore, to use a colloquialism—ah—at a loose end."

"And Edith?" John asked.

"My poor wife still clings with feminine loyalty to those accretions to faith from which I have cut myself free. In most things she is at one with me, but I have steadily resisted the

## Poor Relations

temptation to intrude upon the sanctity of beliefs. She sees my point of view. Of her I can only speak with gratitude. But she is still an old believer. And indeed I am glad, for I should not like to see her tossed upon the stormy seas of doubt and experiment—ah—hurricanes of speculation that surge through the brain."

"And when do you want to move in to Ambles?"

"Well, if it would be convenient, we should like to move gradually to-morrow. I have informed the Bishop—ah—be out in a fortnight."

"But what about Hilda?" John asked doubtfully. "She is really looking after Ambles for me, you know."

"While we have been having our little talk in the study, Edith has been having her little talk with Hilda in the drawing-room, and I think I hear them coming now."

John looked up quickly to see the effect of that talk, and determined to avoid for that night at least any further talk in the nature of little talks with anybody.

"Laurence dear," said Edith mildly, "isn't it time to go?"

John knew that not Hilda herself could have put so aptly what she was feeling; he was sure that in her heart it was indeed high time that Edith and Laurence should be going.

Laurence went over to the window and pulled down the curtains to examine the moon.

"Yes, my dear, I think we might have Primrose now. Where is Frida?"

"She is watching Harold arrange the animals in the museum," he answered. "They are playing at visiting the Natural History Museum."

John was aware that he had not yet expressed his willingness for the Armitage family to move into Ambles; he was equally aware that Hilda was trying to catch his questioning and indignant glance and that he had referred the decision to her. At the same time he could not bring himself to exalt Hilda above Edith who was the favourite of his two daughters, and he was bound to admit the favourite of his two

"But I don't think I'm a very good person to talk to about these abstruse theological difficulties," John protested. "I really haven't considered the question. I know of course to what you refer, but I think this is essentially an occasion for professional advice."

"I do not ask for advice upon my beliefs," Laurence explained. "I recognize that nobody is able to do anything for them except myself. What I want you to do is to let Edith, myself, and little Frida stay with you at Ambles—of course we should be paying guests and you could use our pony and trap and any of the vicarage furniture that you thought suitable—until it has been decided whether I am likely or not to have any success as a dramatist. I do not ask you to undertake the Quixotic task of trying to obtain a public representation of my play about the apostle Thomas. I know that biblical subjects are forbidden by the Lord Chamberlain—surely a monstrous piece of flunkeyism. But I have many other ideas for plays, and I'm convinced that you will sympathize with my anxiety to be able to work undisturbed and, if I may say so, in close propinquity to another playwright who is already famous."

"But why do you want to leave your own vicarage?" John nearly groaned.

"My dear fellow, owing to what I can only call the poisonous behaviour of Mrs. Paxton, my patron, to whom while still a curate at St. Thomas's, Kensington, I gave an abundance of spiritual consolation when she suffered the loss of her husband, owing as I say to her poisonous behaviour following upon a trifling quarrel about some alterations I made in the fabric of my church without consulting her, I have been subjected to ceaseless inquisition and persecution. There has been an outcry in the more bigoted religious press about my doctrine, and in short I have thought it best and most dignified to resign my living. I am therefore, to use a colloquialism—ah—at a loose end."

"And Edith?" John asked.

"My poor wife still clings with feminine loyalty to those accretions to faith from which I have cut myself free. In most things she is at one with me, but I have steadily resisted the

## *Poor Relations*

temptation to intrude upon the sanctity of her beliefs. She sees my point of view. Of her sympathy I can only speak with gratitude. But she is still an old-fashioned believer. And indeed I am glad, for I should not like to see her tossed upon the stormy seas of doubt and ~~and~~—ah—hurricanes of speculation that surge through the brain.”

“And when do you want to move in to Ambles?”

“Well, if it would be convenient, we should like to move gradually to-morrow. I have informed the Bishop—ah—be out in a fortnight.”

“But what about Hilda?” John asked doubtfully. “She is really looking after Ambles for me, you know.”

“While we have been having our little talk in the study, Edith has been having her little talk with her in the drawing-room, and I think I hear them coming now.”

John looked up quickly to see the effect of that talk, and determined to avoid for that night at least any further discussion in the nature of little talks with anybody.

“Laurence dear,” said Edith mildly, “isn’t it time to go?”

John knew that not Hilda herself could have prophesied what she was feeling; he was sure that in the end it was indeed high time that Edith and Laurence should be going.

Laurence went over to the window and pulled down the curtains to examine the moon.

“Yes, my dear, I think we might have Primrose now. Where is Frida?”

“She is watching Harold arrange the animals in the aviary. He gave her. They are playing at visiting the Natural History Museum.”

John was aware that he had not yet expressed his wish for the Armitage family to move into Amblesham. He was equally aware that Hilda was trying to catch his questioning and indignant glance and that he had referred the decision to her. At the same time he was trying to bring himself to exalt Hilda above Edith who was the favourite, and he was bound to admit the favourite of his father.



should be her pilot. That Laurence would be included in his beneficence was certainly a flaw in the emerald of his bounty, a fly in the amber of his self-satisfaction; but after all so long as Edith was secure and happy such blemishes were hardly perceptible. He ought to think himself lucky that he was in a position to help his relations; the power of doing kind actions was surely the greatest privilege accorded to the successful man. And what right had Hilda to object? Good gracious, as if she herself were not dependent enough upon him! But there had always been visible in Hilda this wretched spirit of competition. It had been in just the same spirit that she had married Daniel Curtis; she had not been able to endure her younger sister's engagement to the tall handsome curate and had snatched at the middle-aged explorer in order to be married simultaneously and secure the best wedding-presents for herself. But what had Daniel Curtis seen in Hilda? What had that myopic and taciturn man found in Hilda to gladden a short visit to England between his life on the Orinoco and his intended life at the back of the uncharted Amazons? And had his short experience of her made him so reckless that nothing but his spectacles were found by the rescuers? What mad impulse to perpetuate his name beyond the numerous beetles, flowers, monkeys, and butterflies to which it was already attached by many learned societies had led him to bequeath Harold to humanity? Was not his collection of humming-birds enough?

"I'm really very glad that Edith is coming to Ambles," John murmured. "Very glad indeed. It will serve Hilda right." He began to wonder if he actually disliked Hilda and to realize that he had never really forgiven her for refusing to be interested in his first published story. How well he remembered that occasion—twenty years ago almost to a day. It had been a dreary November in the time when London really did have fogs, and when the sense of his father's approaching death had added to the general gloom. James had been acting as his father's partner for more than a year and had already nearly ruined the practice by his inexperience and want of affability. George and himself were both in city offices—George in wool, himself in dog-biscuits. George did not seem

## *Poor Relations*

to mind the soul-destroying existence and was full of ambition; but himself had loathed it and cared for but literature. How he had pleaded with that dry whose cynical tormented face on its pillow smoking-cigar-ash even now vividly haunted his memory; but old man had refused him the least temporary help actually chuckled with delight amidst all his pain at thought of how his family would have to work for a living should mercifully be dead. Was it surprising, when finding he had found at the office a communication from a cate of provincial papers to inform him of his story accepted, that he should have arrived home in a flood of hope and enthusiasm? And then he had been the whispering voices and the news of his father's death. He had been shocked and grieved, even disappointed. It was too late to announce his success to the old man. He had not been able to resist telling Hilda, a gawky, girl of eighteen, that his story had been taken. He remembered her expression in that befogged gaslight even now, a vision of utter lack of interest faintly coloured with his own bad taste. Then he had gone upstairs to see her who was bathed in tears, though she had been warned six months ago that her husband might die at any time. He had ventured after a few formal words of sympathy to lighten the burden of her grief by taking the communication from his pocket, where it had been cradled lovingly between his fingers, and reading it to her. He was certain that she would be interested because she was a reader of stories and must surely derive a great comfort from the contemplation of her own son as an author. He was evidently too much overcome by the insistence and by the prospect of monetary difficulties in the future to grasp what he was telling her; it had struck him that he had actually never realised that the stories she enjoyed were written by men and women any more than it had struck another person that advertisements were all written by human beings with their own histories of love and

"You mustn't neglect your office-work, Johnie," she had said. "We shall want every halfpenny

Papa is gone. James does his best, but the patients were more used to Papa."

After these two rebuffs John had not felt inclined to break his good news to James who would be sure to sneer, or to George who would only laugh; so he had wandered upstairs to the old schoolroom, where he had found Edith sitting by a dull fire and dissuading little Hugh from throwing coals at the cat. As soon as he had told Edith what had happened she had made a hero of him and ever afterwards treated him with admiration as well as affection. Had she not prophesied even that he would be another Dickens? That was something like sisterly love, and he had volunteered to read her the original rough copy, which notwithstanding Hugh's whining interruptions she had enjoyed as much as he had enjoyed it himself. Certainly Edith must come to Ambles; twenty years were not enough to obliterate the memory of that warm-hearted girl of fifteen and of her welcome praise.

But Hugh? What malign spirit had brought Hugh to his mind at a moment when he was already just faintly disturbed by the prospect of his relations' increasing demands upon his attention? Hugh was only twenty-seven now and much too conspicuously for his own good the youngest of the family; like all children that arrive unexpectedly after a long interval he had seemed the pledge of his parents' renewed youth on the very threshold of old age, and had been spoilt even by his cross-grained old father in consequence: as for his mother, though it was out of her power to spoil him extravagantly with money, she gave him all that she did not spend on caps for herself. John determined to make enquiries about Hugh to-morrow. Not another penny should he have from him, not another farthing. If he could not live on what he earned in the office of Stephen Crutchley who had accepted the young spendthrift out of regard for their lifelong friendship, if he could not become a decent well-behaved architect, why he could starve. Not another penny . . . and the rest of his relations agreed with John on this point, for if to him Hugh was a skeleton in the family cupboard, to them he was a skeleton at the family feast.

## *Poor Relations*

John expelled from his mind all misgivings and hoped it would be a fine day to-morrow so that he looked round the garden and see what plants wanted. He tried to remember the name of an ornamental shrub recommended by Miss Hamilton, turned over on his side, to sleep.

## Chapter Four

EARLY next morning John dreamt that he was buying calico in an immense shop and that in a dreamlike inconsequence the people there, customers and shopmen alike, were abruptly seized with a frenzy of destruction so violent that they began to tear up all the material upon which they could lay their hands; indeed, so loud was the noise of rent cloth that John woke up with the sound of it still in his ears. Gradually it was borne in upon a brain wrestling with actuality that the noise might have emanated from the direction of a small casement looking eastward into the garden across a steep penthouse which ran down to within two feet of the ground. Although the noise had stopped some time before John had precisely located its whereabouts and really before he was perfectly convinced that he was awake, he jumped out of bed and hurried across the chilly boards to ascertain if after all it had only been a relic of his dream. No active cause was visible; but the moss, the stonecrop, and the tiles upon the penthouse had been clawed from top to bottom as if by some mighty cat, and John for a brief instant savoured that elated perplexity which often occurs to heroes in the opening paragraphs of a sensational novel.

"It's a very old house," he thought hopefully, and began to degrade his reason to a condition of sycophantic credulity. "And of course anything like a ghost at seven o'clock in the morning is rare—very rare. The evidence would be unassailable. . . ."

After toadying to the marvellous for a while, he sought a natural explanation of the phenomenon and honestly tried not to want it to prove inexplicable. The noise began again overhead; a fleeting object darkened the casement like the swift passage of a bird and struck the penthouse below; there was a slow grinding shriek, a clatter of broken tiles and leaden piping then a small figure stuck all over with feathers emerged from the herbaceous border and smiled up at him.

"Good heavens, my boy, what in creation are you trying to

## Poor Relations

"I'm learning to toboggan, Uncle John."

"But didn't I explain to you that tobogganing carried out after a heavy snowfall?"

"Well, it hasn't snowed yet," Harold pointed offended voice.

"Listen to me. If it snows for a month without you're never to toboggan down a roof. What's having all those jolly hills at the back of the house if use them?"

John spoke as if he had brought back the hills from at the same time as he was supposed to have brought toboggan.

"There's a river too," Harold observed.

"You can't toboggan down a river—unless of course frozen over."

"I don't want to toboggan down the river, but Canadian canoe for the river I could wait for the easily."

John after a brief vision of a canoe being towed Atlantic by the *Murmania* felt that he was being subjected to the lawless exactions of a brigand, but could think more novel in the way of defiance than:

"Go away now and be a good boy."

"Can't I . . ." Harold began.

"No, you can't. If those chickens' feathers . . ."

"They're pigeons' feathers," his nephew corrected.

"If those feathers stuck in your hair are to convey an impression that you're a Red Indian and sit in your wigwam till breakfast and smoke of peace."

"Mother said I wasn't to smoke till I was twenty."

"Not literally, you young ass. Why, good heavens, young days such an allusion to Mayne Reid would eagerly taken up by any boy."

Something was going wrong with this conversation and he added lamely:

"Anyway, go away now."

"But Uncle John, I . . ."

"Don't Uncle John me. I don't feel like an

EARLY next morning John dreamt that he was buying calico in an immense shop and that in a dreamlike inconsequence the people there, customers and shopmen alike, were abruptly seized with a frenzy of destruction so violent that they began to tear up all the material upon which they could lay their hands; indeed, so loud was the noise of rent cloth that John woke up with the sound of it still in his ears. Gradually it was borne in upon a brain wrestling with actuality that the noise might have emanated from the direction of a small casement looking eastward into the garden across a steep penthouse which ran down to within two feet of the ground. Although the noise had stopped some time before John had precisely located its whereabouts and really before he was perfectly convinced that he was awake, he jumped out of bed and hurried across the chilly boards to ascertain if after all it had only been a relic of his dream. No active cause was visible; but the moss, the stonecrop, and the tiles upon the penthouse had been clawed from top to bottom as if by some mighty cat, and John for a brief instant savoured that elated perplexity which often occurs to heroes in the opening paragraphs of a sensational novel.

"It's a very old house," he thought hopefully, and began to degrade his reason to a condition of sycophantic credulity. "And of course anything like a ghost at seven o'clock in the morning is rare—very rare. The evidence would be unassailable. . . ."

After toadying to the marvellous for a while, he sought a natural explanation of the phenomenon and honestly tried not to want it to prove inexplicable. The noise began again overhead; a fleeting object darkened the casement like the swift passage of a bird and struck the penthouse below; there was a slow grinding shriek, a clatter of broken tiles and leaden piping; then a small figure stuck all over with feathers emerged from the herbaceous border and smiled up at him.

"Good heavens, my boy, what in creation are you trying to do?" John shouted sternly.

## Poor Relations

"I'm learning to toboggan, Uncle John."

"But didn't I explain to you that tobogganing is carried out after a heavy snowfall?"

"Well, it hasn't snowed yet," Harold pointed offended voice.

"Listen to me. If it snows for a month without you're never to toboggan down a roof. What's having all those jolly hills at the back of the house if use them?"

John spoke as if he had brought back the hills from at the same time as he was supposed to have brought toboggan.

"There's a river too," Harold observed.

"You can't toboggan down a river—unless of course frozen over."

"I don't want to toboggan down the river, but I want a Canadian canoe for the river I could wait for the snow easily."

John after a brief vision of a canoe being towed across the Atlantic by the *Murmania* felt that he was being subjected to the lawless exactions of a brigand, but could think of nothing more novel in the way of defiance than:

"Go away now and be a good boy."

"Can't I . . ." Harold began.

"No, you can't. If those chickens' feathers . . ."

"They're pigeons' feathers," his nephew corrected.

"If those feathers stuck in your hair are intended to convey an impression that you're a Red Indian and sit in your wigwam till breakfast and smoke till of peace."

"Mother said I wasn't to smoke till I was twenty-one."

"Not literally, you young ass. Why, good heavens, in your young days such an allusion to Mayne Reid would have been eagerly taken up by any boy."

Something was going wrong with this conversation John and he added lamely:

"Anyway, go away now."



morning. Suppose I'd been shaving when you started that fool's game? I might have cut my head off."

"But, Uncle John, I've left my spectacles on one of the chimneys. Mother said that whenever I was playing a rough game I was to take off my spectacles first."

"You'll have to do without your spectacles, that's all. The gardener will get them for you after breakfast. Anyway, a Red Indian chief in spectacles is unnatural."

"Well, I'm not a Red Indian any longer."

"You can't chop and change like that. You'll have to be a Red Indian now till after breakfast. Don't argue any more, because I'm standing here in bare feet. Go and do some weeding in the garden. You've pulled up all the plants on the roof."

"I can't read without my spectacles."

"Weed, not read!"

"Well, I can't weed either. I can't do anything without my spectacles."

"Then go away and do nothing."

Harold shuffled off disconsolately, and John rang for his shaving water.

At breakfast Hilda asked anxiously after her son's whereabouts; and John, the last vestige of whose irritation had vanished in the smell of fried bacon and eggs, related the story of the morning's escapade as a good joke.

"But he can't see anything without his spectacles," Hilda exclaimed.

"Oh, he'll find his way to the breakfast table all right," John prophesied.

"These bachelors," murmured Hilda turning to her mother with a wry little laugh. "Hark! isn't that Harold calling?"

"No, no, no, it's the pigeons," John laughed. "They're probably fretting for their feathers."

"It's to be hoped," said old Mrs. Touchwood, "that he's not fallen into the well by leaving off his spectacles like this. I never could abide wells. And I hate to think of people leaving things off suddenly. It's always a mistake. I remember little Hughie once left off his woollen vests in May and caught a most terrible cold that wouldn't go away—it simply wouldn't go."

## *Poor Relations*

"How is Hugh, by the way?" John asked.

"The same as ever," Hilda put in with coldness. She was able to forget Harold's myopic wand in the pleasure of crabbing her youngest brother.

"Ah, you're all very hard on poor Hughie," sighed the old lady. "But he's always been very fond of his poor mother."

"He's very fond of what he can get out of you," John sneered.

"And it's little enough he can, poor boy. Goodness! I've little enough to spare for him. I wish you could see your way to do something for Hughie, Johnnie." The old lady went on.

"John has done quite enough for him," Hilda said, which was perfectly true.

"He's had to leave his rooms in Earl's Court," Mr. Wood lamented.

"What for? Getting drunk, I suppose?" John asked sternly.

"No, it was the drains. He's staying with his friend Fenton whom I cannot pretend to like. He seems a scapegrace. Poor little Hughie. I wish everybody to go against him. It's to be hoped he won't go and get married, poor boy, for I'm sure his wife wouldn't understand him."

"Surely he's not thinking of getting married?" John asked in dismay.

"Why no, of course not," said the old lady. "He won't take anybody up, Johnnie! I said it's to be hoped he won't get married."

At this moment Emily came in to announce that Harold was up on the roof shouting for dear life. "Turn as it give Cook and I, mum," she said, "to the garshly voice coming down the chimney. Cook has took with the convulsions, and if it had of been afeared, mum, she says she's shaw she doesn't know what she's of done, she wouldn't, she's that frightened of howls. It's the one thing she can't ever be really comfortable for in the country, she says, the howls and the hearwigs."

"I'm under the impression," John declared solemnly, "that I forbade Harold to go near the roof. He has disobeyed."

express commands, he must suffer for it by the loss of his breakfast. He has chosen to go back on the roof: on the roof he shall stay."

"But his breakfast?" Hilda almost whimpered. She was so much awed by her brother's unusually pompous phraseology that he began to be impressed by it himself and to feel the first faint intimations of the pleasures of tyranny: he began to visualize himself as the unbending ruler of all his relations.

"His breakfast can be sent up to him, and I hope it will attract every wasp in the neighbourhood."

This to John seemed the most savage aspiration he could have uttered: autumnal wasps disturbed him as much as dragons used to disturb princesses.

"Harold likes wasps," said Hilda. "He observes their habits."

This revelation of his nephew's tastes took away John's last belief in his humanity, and the only retort he could think of was a suggestion that he should go at once to a boarding-school.

"Likes wasps?" he repeated. "The child must be mad. You'll tell me next that he likes blackbeetles."

"He trained a blackbeetle once to eat something. I forget what it was now. But the poor boy was so happy about his little triumph. You ought to remember, John, that he takes after his father."

John made up his mind at this moment that Daniel Curtis must have married Hilda in a spirit of the purest empirical science.

"Well, he's not to go training insects in my house," John said firmly. "And if I see any insects anywhere about Ambles that show the slightest sign of having been encouraged to suppose themselves on an equal with mankind I shall tread on them."

"I'm afraid the crossing must have upset you, Johnnie," said old Mrs Touchwood sympathetically. "You seem quite out of sorts this morning. And I don't like the idea of poor little Harold's balancing himself all alone on a chimney. It was never any pleasure to me to watch tight-rope dancers or acrobats. Indeed except for the clowns I never could abide circuses."

## *Poor Relations*

Hilda quickly took up the appeal and begged Huggins the gardener rescue her son.

"Oh, very well," he assented. "But once for be clearly understood that I've come down to write a new play and that some arrangement concluded by which I have my mornings comperturbed."

"Of course," said Hilda brightening at the prospect of Harold's release.

"Of course," John echoed sardonically within himself. He did not feel that the sight of Harold's ravaging after a fast would induce in him the right mood for Joan. He left the breakfast table and went upstairs to his study. Here he found that some 'illiterate oaf,' as he called the person responsible, had put in upside down upon the shelves the standard works he had hastily amassed. Instead of his ideas in order, he had to set his books in order: a hot and dusty morning with rows of unreadable books came downstairs to find that the vicarage party had just in time for lunch, bringing with them as the guard of their occupation a large clothes-basket of what Laurence described as 'necessary odds and ends' which might be overlooked later.

"It's my theory of moving," he added. "The children first."

He enunciated this theory with as much momentary authority as the captain of a ship when he orders the crew and children into the boats first.

The moving in of the vicarage party lasted over a fortnight during which John found it impossible to settle down to his play. No sooner would he have worked himself into a suitable frame of mind in which he might express dramatically and poetically the Maid's reception of her heavenly lover than a very hot man wearing a green baize apron would appear in the doorway of the library and announce that a drawer had hopelessly involved some vital knot in the domestic communications. It was no good for John to ask for anything: his sister had taken up the attitude that it was John's fault, that she had done her best to preserve his

that her advice had been ignored, and that for the rest of her life she intended to efface herself.

"I'm a mere cipher," she kept repeating.

On one occasion when a bureau of sham ebony that looked like a blind man's dream of Cologne Cathedral had managed to wedge all its pinnacles into the lintel of the front-door, John observed to Laurence he had understood that only such furniture from the vicarage as was required to supplement the Ambles furniture would be brought there.

"I thought this bureau would appeal to you," Laurence replied. "It seemed to me in keeping with much of your work."

John looked up sharply to see if he was being chaffed; but his brother-in-law's expression was earnest, and the intended compliment struck more hardly at John's self-confidence than the most malicious review.

"Does my work really seem like gimcrack gothic?" he asked himself.

In a fit of exasperation he threw himself so vigorously into the business of forcing the bureau into the house that when it was inside it looked like a ruined abbey on the afternoon of a bank holiday.

"It had better be taken up into the garrets for the present," he said grimly. "It can be mended later on."

The comparison of his work to that bureau haunted John at his own writing-table for the rest of the morning; thinking of the Bishop of Silchester's objection to Laurence, he found it hard to make the various bishops in his play as unsympathetic as they ought to be for dramatic contrast. Then he remembered that after all it had been the Bishop of Silchester's strong action which had brought Laurence to Ambles; the stream of insulting epithets for bishops flowed as strongly as ever, and he worked in a justifiable pun upon the name of Pierre Cauchon, his chief episcopal villain.

"I wonder, if I were allowed to, whether I would condemn Laurence to be burnt alive. Wasn't there a Saint Laurence who was grilled? I really believe I would almost grill him, I really do. There's something exceptionally irritating to me about that man's whole personality. And I'm not at all sure I approve

## Poor Relations

of a clergyman's giving up his beliefs. One might get out of that by the way—something about a weather-vane on a church steeple. I don't think a clergyman ought to give up so easily. It's his business not to be influenced by fashion or thought. This passion for realism is everywhere. . . goodness I've been through it and got over it and I'll stay with me for ever. It's a most unprofitable creed. What's the circulation as a realist? I once reached four thousand, now four thousand? Why, it isn't half the population. And now Laurence Armitage takes up with it after being a vicar for ten years. Idiot! Religion isn't realistic, it was realistic. Religion is the entertainment of man's mind, just as the romantic drama is the entertainment of the romantic mentality. I don't read Anatole France for my reproach of Joan of Arc. What business has Laurence to meddle with—what's his name—Colonel Ingoldsby—when he ought to be thinking about his Harvest Festival. And then he has the effrontery to compare my work with his bureau! If that's all his religion meant to him—that piece of gimcrack gothic, no wonder it wouldn't hold. Why the green fumed oak of a sentimental rationalism be better than that. Confound Laurence! I knew it would happen when he came. He's taken my mind completely out of my own work. I can't write a word this morning."

John rushed away from his manuscript and weeded down a secluded border until Huggins told him he had dug away the autumn-sown sweet-peas that were coming up so nicely and standing the early frosts a treat.

"I'm not even allowed to weed my own garden now," he thought, burking the point at issue; and his disillusion became so profound that he actually invited Harold to go for a walk with him.

"Can I bring my blow-pipe?" asked the young man gleefully.

"You don't want to load yourself up with soap and water," said John. "Keep that till you come in."

"My South American blow-pipe, Uncle John. It's the one which Father sent home. It belonged to a little boy, but the darts aren't poisoned, Father told Mother.

"Don't you be too sure," John advised him. "Explorers will say anything."

"Well, can I bring it?"

"No, we'll take a non-murderous walk for a change. I'm tired of being shunned by the common objects of the countryside."

"Well, shall I bring *Ants, Bees, and Wasps*?"

"Certainly not. We don't want to go trailing about Hampshire like two jam sandwiches."

"I mean the book."

"No, if you want to carry something, you can carry my cleeck and six golf-balls."

"Oh yes, and then I'll practise bringing eggs down in my mouth from very high trees."

John liked this form of exercise, because at the trifling cost of making one ball intolerably sticky it kept Harold from asking questions; for about two hundred yards he enjoyed this walk more than any he had ever taken with his nephew.

"But bird's-nesting time won't come till the spring," Harold sighed.

"No," John admitted regretfully: there were many lofty trees round Ambles, and with his mouth full of eggs anything might happen to Harold.

The transference of the vicarage family was at last complete, and John was penitently astonished to find that Laurence really did intend to pay for their board; in fact the ex-vicar presented him with a cheque for two months on account calculated at a guinea a week each. John was so much moved by this event—the manner in which Laurence offered the cheque gave it the character of a testimonial and thereby added to John's sense of obligation—that he was even embarrassed by the notion of accepting it. At the same time a faint echo of his own realistic beginnings tinkled in his ear a warning not to refuse it, both for his own sake and for the sake of his brother-in-law. He therefore escaped from the imputation of avarice by suggesting that the cheque should be handed to Hilda who as housekeeper would know how to employ it best. John secretly hoped that Hilda through being able to extract what he thought of as 'a little pin-money for herself' out of it,

might discard the martyr's halo that was at present  
her brains tightly enough, if one might judge by  
stricted expression.

"There will undoubtedly be a small profit," he told  
"for if Laurence has a rather monkish appetite,  
Frida eat very little."

Perhaps Hilda did manage to make a small profit  
rate she seemed reconciled to the presence of the  
and gave up declaring that she was a cipher. The  
moving in had made Laurence's company, while he  
ing from the reaction, almost bearable. Frida ap-  
habit she had of whispering at great length in  
ear was a nice uninquisitive child, and Edith when  
whispering back to Frida or echoing Laurence was  
rouse in her brother's heart feelings of warm affec-  
Mrs. Touchwood had acquired from some caller a  
patience, which kept her gently simmering in the  
every evening; Harold had discovered among the  
ends of salvage from the move a sixpenny encyclo-  
though it made him unpleasantly informative at  
him from being interrogative, which John found on  
a slight advantage. Janet Bond had written again  
about *Joan of Arc*, and the film company had give  
terms for *The Fall of Babylon*. Really, except for  
letters from his sisters-in-law in London, John w  
contemplate with much less misgiving a prospect o  
all the winter at Ambles. Besides, he had secured  
with a dashing chestnut mare, and he was nego-  
twenty-acre field.

Yes, everything was very jolly, and he might  
finishing the first draft of the second act before Ch  
would be jolly to do that and jolly to invite James  
and George and Eleanor, but not Hugh—in no circ  
should Hugh be included in the yuletide armistice  
Ambles for an uproarious jolly week. Then Janua  
be devoted to the first draft of the third act  
should be possible to write to Janet Bond presently  
her of a production next autumn. John was feelin  
larly optimistic. For three days in succession the



## Poor Relations

st act had been moving as rhythmically and regularly toward the curtain as the feet of guardsmen move along the Buckingham Palace Road. It was a fine frosty morning, and even so early in the day John was tapping his second egg to the metrical postrophes of Uncle Laxart's speech offering to take his niece Joan to interview Robert de Baudricourt. Suddenly he noticed that Laurence had not yet put in his appearance. This was strange behaviour for one who still preserved from the habit of many early services an excited punctuality for his breakfast, and lightly he asked Edith what had become of her husband.

"He hopes to begin working again at his play this morning. Being you working so hard makes him feel lazy." Edith laughed faintly and fearfully, as if she would deprecate her own profanity in referring to so gross a quality as laziness in connection with her husband, and perhaps for the first time in her life she proclaimed that her opinion was only an echo of Laurence's own by adding, "*he* says that it makes him feel lazy. So he's going to begin at once."

John, whose mind kept reverting iambically and trochaically to the curtain of his first act, merely replied without any trace of awe that he was glad Laurence felt in the vein.

"But he hasn't decided yet," Edith continued, "which room he's going to work in."

For the first time a puff of apprehension twitched the little straw that might be going to break the camel's back.

"I'm afraid I can't offer him the library," John said quickly. "*And you shall see the King of France to-day,*" he went on composing in his head. "No—*And you shall see King Charles*—no—and you shall see the King of France at once—no—and you shall see the King of France forthwith. Sensation among the villagers standing round. *Forthwith* is weak at the end of a line. *I swear that you shall see the King of France.* Sensation: Yes, that's it."

The top of John's egg was by this time so completely cracked by his metronomic spoon that a good deal of the shell was driven down into the egg: it did not matter, however, because appetite and inspiration were both disposed of by the arrival of Laurence.

## *Poor Relations*

"I wish you could have managed to help me with these things," he was muttering reproachfully to his

The things consisted of six or seven books, a foolscap, an inkpot dangerously brimming, a paper of olive wood from Gethsemane, several pens and a roll of blotting paper as white as the snow upon of Mont Blanc, and so fat that John thought at the tablecloth and wondered what his brother-in-law had with it. He was even chilled by a brief and he thought that he was going to hold a communion service. He hastily from the table to help her husband unload

"I'm so sorry, dear, why didn't you ring?"

"My dear, how could I ring without letting me drop?" Laurence asked patiently.

"Or call?"

"My chin was too much occupied for calling, doesn't matter, Edith. As you see, I've managed to get the thing down quite safely."

"I'm so sorry," Edith went on. "I'd no idea

"I told you that I was going to begin work this

"Yes, how stupid of me . . . I'm so sorry . . ."

"Going to work, are you?" interrupted John, anxious to stop Edith's conjugal amenity. "That's

"Yes, I'm really only waiting now to choose my

"I'm sorry I can't offer you mine . . . but I must find . . ."

"Of course," Laurence agreed with a nod of understanding. "Of course, my dear fellow, I should not trespass. I, though indeed I've no right to myself with you, also like to work alone. In fact that a secure solitude provides the ideal setting for composition. I have a habit—perhaps it comes from my sermons with my eye always upon the spoken and upon the written word—I have a habit of dictating my pages aloud to myself. That necessitates my being absolutely alone."

"Yes, you see," Edith said, "if you're alone, you're disturbed."

John who was still sensitive to Edith's sensitiveness

her last by incorporating Hilda in the conversation with a  
"What room do you advise?"

"Why not the dining-room? I'll tell Emily to clear away the breakfast things at once."

"Clear away?" Laurence repeated.

"And they won't be laying for lunch till a quarter-to-one."

"Laying for lunch?" Laurence gasped. "My dear Hilda! I don't wish to attribute to my—ah—work an importance which perhaps as a hitherto unacted playwright I have no right to attribute, but I think John at any rate will appreciate my objection to working with—ah—the breadknife suspended over my head like the proverbial sword of Damocles. No, I'm afraid I must rule out the dining-room as a practicable environment."

"And Mama likes to sit in the drawing-room," said Hilda.

"In any case," Laurence said indulgently, "I shouldn't feel at ease in the drawing-room. So I shall not disturb Mama. I had thought of suggesting that the children should be given another room in which to play, but to tell the truth I'm tired of moving furniture about. The fact is I miss my vicarage study: it was my own."

"Yes, nobody at the vicarage ever thought of interrupting him, you see," Edith explained.

"Well," said John roused by the necessity of getting Joan started upon her journey to interview Robert de Baudricourt, "there are several empty bedrooms upstairs. One of them could be transformed into a study for Laurence."

"That means more arranging of furniture," Laurence objected.

"Then there's the garret," said John. "You'd find your bureau up there."

Laurence smiled in order to show how well he understood that the suggestion was only playfulness on John's side and how little he minded the good-natured joke.

"There is one room which might be made—ah—conducive to good work, though at present it is occupied by a quantity of apples; they, however, could easily be moved."

"But I moved them in there from what is now your room," Hilda protested.

## Poor Relations

"It is good for apples to be frequently moved,"  
ence kindly. "In fact the oftener they are moved,  
And this holds good equally for pippins, codlins,  
On the other hand it means I shall lose half a  
because even if I *could* make a temporary beginning  
else, I should have to superintend the arrangement  
furniture."

"But I thought you didn't want to have any  
arranging to do," Hilda contested acrimoniously.  
are two quite empty rooms at the other en  
passage."

"Yes, but I like the room in which the apples are.  
appreciate my desire for a sympathetic milieu."

"Come, come, we will move the apples," John  
hurriedly.

Better that the apples should roll from room  
eternally than that he should be driven into offering  
a corner of the library, for he suspected that notwith  
the disclaimer this was his brother-in-law's real ob-

"It doesn't say anything about apples in the ency-  
muttered Harold in an aggrieved voice. "*Apo-*  
*ment of, Apothecaries measure, Appetite loss of. This*  
*to general debility, irregularity in meals, overwork,*  
*exercise, constipation, and many other . . .*"

"Goodness gracious me, whatever has the boy  
of?" exclaimed his grandmother.

"Grandmama, if you mix lanoline with an equal  
of sulphur you can cure itch," Harold went on  
spectacles glued to the page. "And oh, Grandm-  
know you told me not to make a noise the other day  
your heart was weak. Well, you're suffering from it.  
The encyclopedia says that many people who are  
from flatulence think they have heart disease."

"Will no one stop the child?" Grandmama plead-

Laurence snatched away the book from his nephew  
it in his pocket.

"That book is mine, I believe, Harold," he said firm-  
not even Hilda dared protest, so majestic was Laurence  
much fluttered was poor Grandmama.

John seized the opportunity to make his escape ; but when he was at last seated before his table the feet of the first act limped pitifully ; Laurence had trodden with all his might upon their toes ; his work that morning was chiropody not composition, and bungling chiropody at that. After lunch Laurence was solemnly inducted to his new study, and he may have been conscious of an ecclesiastical parallel in the manner of his taking possession, for he made a grave joke about it.

"Let us hope that I shall not be driven out of my new living by being too—ah—broad."

His wife did not realize that he was being droll and had drawn down her lips to an expression of pained sympathy, when she saw the others all laughing and Laurence smiling his acknowledgments ; her desperate effort to change the contours of her face before Laurence noticed her failure to respond sensibly gave the impression that she had nearly swallowed a loose tooth.

"Perhaps you'd like me to bring up your tea, dear, so that you won't be disturbed ?" she suggested.

"Ah, tea. . . ." murmured Laurence. "Let me see. It's now a quarter-past two. Tea is at half-past four. I will come down for half an hour. That will give me a clear two hours before dinner. If I allow a quarter of an hour for arranging my table, that will give me four hours in all. Perhaps considering my strenuous morning four hours will be enough for the first day. I don't like the notion of working after dinner," he added to John.

"No ?" queried John doubtfully. He had hoped that his brother-in-law would feel inspired by the port : it was easy enough to avoid him in the afternoon, especially since on the first occasion that he had been taken for a drive in the new dogcart he had evidently been imbued with a detestation of driving that would probably last for the remainder of his life ; in fact he was talking already of wanting to sell Primrose and the vicarage chaise.

"Though of course on some evenings I may not be able to help it," added Laurence. "I may *have* to work."

"Of course you may," John assented encouragingly. "I daresay there'll be evenings when the mere idea of waiting even

## Poor Relations

for coffee will make you fidgety. You mustn't lose you know."

"No, of course, I appreciate that."

"There's nothing so easily lost as the creative said."

"Did he?" Laurence murmured anxiously. promise you I shall let nothing interfere with conjunction fizzed from his mouth like soda from "if I'm in the—ah—mood. The mood—yes—"  
His brow began to lower; the mood was upon everybody stole quietly from the room. They reached the head of the stairs when the door opened. Laurence called after Edith: "I should prefer that brings me news of tea merely knocks without call shall assume that a knock upon my door means I don't wish anybody to come in."

Laurence disappeared. He seemed under the strong mental aphrodisiac and was evidently himself against being discovered in an embrace with his Muse.

"This is very good for me," thought John. "me how easily a man may make a confounded ass without anybody's raising a finger to warn him. didn't give that sort of impression to those two board. I shall have to watch myself very future."

At this moment Emily announced that Lawyer waiting to see Mr. Touchwood, which meant that acre field was at last his. The legal formalities were that very afternoon John had the pleasure of watching fierce little Kerry cows munch the last blades of would ever munch in his field. But it was nearly they were driven home, and John lost five balls in his triumph with a brassy.

Laurence appeared at tea in a velveteen coat, which provided the topic of the longest whisper that ever been known to utter.

"Come, come, Frida," said her father. "disturb us by saying aloud what you want to say."

leaned over majestically to emphasize his rebuke and in doing so brushed with his sleeve Grandmama's wrist.

"Goodness, it's a cat," the old lady cried with a shudder. "I shall have to go away from here, Johnnie, if you have a cat in the house. I'd rather have mice all over me than one of those horrid cats. Ugh! the nasty thing!"

She was not at all convinced of her mistake even when persuaded to stroke her son-in-law's coat.

"I hope it's been properly shooed out. Harold, please look well under all the chairs, there's a good boy."

During the next few days John felt that he was being in some indefinable way ousted by Laurence from the spiritual mastery of his own house. John was averse from according to his brother-in-law a greater forcefulness of character than he could ascribe to himself; if he had to admit that he really was being supplanted somehow, he preferred to search for the explanation in the years of theocratic prestige that gave a background to the all-pervasiveness of that sacerdotal personality. Yet ultimately the consciousness of his own relegation to a secondary place remained elusive and incommunicable. He could not for instance grumble that the times of the meals were being altered nor complain that in the smallest detail the domestic mechanism was being geared up or down to suit Laurence; the whole impression was intrinsically of a spiritual eviction, and the nearest he could get to formulating his resentment (though perhaps resentment was too definite a word for this vague uneasiness) was his own gradually growing opinion that of all those at present under the Ambles roof Laurence was the most important. This loss of importance was bad for John's work, upon which it soon began to exert a discouraging influence, because he became doubtful of his position in the world of letters, hypercritical of his talent, and almost timid about his social status. He began to meditate the long line of failures to dramatize the immortal tale of Joan of Arc immortally, to see himself dangling at the end of this long line of ineptitudes, and to ask himself whether bearing in mind the vastness of even our own solar system it was really worth while writing at all. It could not be due to anything or anybody but Laurence, this sense of his own failure.

## *Poor Relations*

when a few years ago he had reached the conclusion that as a realistic novelist he was a failure had he been so aware of his own insignificance in time and space.

"I shall have to go away if I'm ever to get a play," he told himself.

Yet still so indefinite was his sense of subordination that he accused his liver (an honest one that did not reproach) and bent over his table again with all the attention he could muster. The concrete fact was still his capacity for self-deception was still robust enough to tell him that it was all a passing fancy, and he might be plodding on at Ambles for the rest of the winter if called about a week after Laurence had begun to write, his own library had not yielded to the usurper, and the pen was in hand.

"I don't like to interrupt you, my dear fellow. . . you have your own work to consider . . . but I'm anxious for your opinion—in fact I should like to read you my manuscript. It was useless to resist: if it were not now, it would be later.

"With pleasure," said John. Then he made a dash. "Though I prefer reading to myself."

"That would involve waiting for the typewriter. The screed is—ah—difficult to make out. And I've introduced good many erasures and insertions. No, I think you had better let me read it to you."

John indicated a chair and looked out of the window longingly at the birds, as patients in the hands of a dentist, longingly the sparrows in the dingy evergreens of the back garden.



caned over majestically to emphasize his rebuke and in doing so brushed with his sleeve Grandmama's wrist.

"Goodness, it's a cat," the old lady cried with a shudder. "I shall have to go away from here, Johnnie, if you have a cat in the house. I'd rather have mice all over me than one of those horrid cats. Ugh! the nasty thing!"

She was not at all convinced of her mistake even when persuaded to stroke her son-in-law's coat.

"I hope it's been properly shooed out. Harold, please look well under all the chairs, there's a good boy."

During the next few days John felt that he was being in some indefinable way ousted by Laurence from the spiritual mastery of his own house. John was averse from according to his brother-in-law a greater forcefulness of character than he could ascribe to himself; if he had to admit that he really was being supplanted somehow, he preferred to search for the explanation in the years of theocratic prestige that gave a background to the all-pervasiveness of that sacerdotal personality. Yet ultimately the consciousness of his own relegation to a secondary place remained elusive and incommunicable. He could not for instance grumble that the times of the meals were being altered nor complain that in the smallest detail the domestic mechanism was being geared up or down to suit Laurence; the whole impression was intrinsically of a spiritual eviction, and the nearest he could get to formulating his resentment (though perhaps resentment was too definite a word for this vague uneasiness) was his own gradually growing opinion that of all those at present under the Ambles roof Laurence was the most important. This loss of importance was bad for John's work, upon which it soon began to exert a discouraging influence, because he became doubtful of his position in the world of letters, hypercritical of his talent, and almost timid about his social status. He began to meditate the long line of failures to dramatize the immortal tale of Joan of Arc immortally, to see himself dangling at the end of this long line of ineptitudes, and to ask himself whether bearing in mind the vastness of even our own solar system it was really worth while writing at all. It could not be due to anything or anybody but Laurence, this sense of his own futility; not even

## Poor Relations

when a few years ago he had reached the conclusion that as a realistic novelist he was a failure had he been so aware of his own insignificance in time and space.

"I shall have to go away if I'm ever to get a play," he told himself.

Yet still so indefinite was his sense of subordination that he accused his liver (an honest one that did not reproach) and bent over his table again with all the attention he could muster. The concrete fact was still that his capacity for self-deception was still robust enough to convince him that it was all a passing fancy, and he might be plodding on at Ambles for the rest of the winter if not about a week after Laurence had begun to write, his own library had not yielded to the usurper, still in hand.

"I don't like to interrupt you, my dear fellow. . . you have your own work to consider . . . but I'm in your opinion—in fact I should like to read you my first

It was useless to resist: if it were not now, it would be later.

"With pleasure," said John. Then he made a dash. "Though I prefer reading to myself."

"That would involve waiting for the typewriter. The screed is—ah—difficult to make out. And I've indeed good many erasures and insertions. No, I think you'd better let me read it to you."

John indicated a chair and looked out of the window longingly at the birds, as patients in the hands of a dentist, longingly the sparrows in the dingy evergreens of the back garden.

"When we had our little talk the other day," John began, "you will remember that I spoke of a drama already written, of which the disciple Thomas was the antagonist. This drama notwithstanding the probable negative attitude of the Lord Chamberlain I have rewritten rather I have rewritten the first act. I call the play *Thomas*."

"It sounds a little trivial for such a serious subject, don't you think?" John suggested. "I mean, Thomas has

associated in so many people's minds with footmen. Wouldn't Saint Thomas be better, and really rather more respectful? Many people still have a great feeling of reverence for apostles."

"No, no, *Thomas* it is: *Thomas* it must remain. You have forgotten perhaps that I told you he was the prototype of the man in the street. It is the simplicity, the unpretentiousness of the title that for me gives it a value. Well, to resume. *Thomas. A play in four acts. By Laurence Armitage.* By the way, I'm going to spell my name with a y in future. Poetic cense. Ha-ha! I shall not advertise the change in the *Times*. But I think it looks more literary with a y. *Act the First. Scene the First. The shore of the Sea of Galilee.* I say nothing else. I don't attempt to describe it. That is what I have learnt from Shakespeare. This modern passion for description can only injure the greatness of the theme. *Enter from the left the Virgin Mary.*"

"Enter who?" asked John in amazement.

"The Virgin Mary. The mother . . ."

"Yes, I know who she is, but . . . well, I'm not a religious man, Laurence, in fact I've not been to church since I was a boy . . . but . . . no, no, you can't do that."

"Why not?"

"It will offend people."

"I want to offend people," Laurence intoned. "If thy eye offend thee, pluck it out."

"Well, you did," said John. "You put in a y instead."

"I'm not jesting, my dear fellow."

"Nor am I," said John. "What I want you to understand is that you can't bring the Virgin Mary on the stage. Why, I'm even doubtful about Joan of Arc's vision of the Archangel Michael. Some people may object to that, though I'm counting on his being generally taken for St. George."

"I know that you are writing a play about Joan of Arc, but—and I hope you'll not take unkindly what I'm going to say—Joan of Arc can never be more than a pretty piece of mediævalism, whereas *Thomas* . . ."

John gave up, and the next morning he told the household that he was called back to London on business.

## *Poor Relations*

"Perhaps I shall have some peace here," he said, round at his dignified Church Row library.

"Mrs. James called earlier this morning, sir, and disturb you, but she hoped you'd had a comfortable and left these flowers, and Mrs. George has telephoned the theatre to say she'll be here almost directly."

"Thank you, Mrs. Worfolk," John said. "Perhaps George will be taking lunch."

"Yes, sir I expect she will," said his housekeeper.

## Chapter Five

MRS. GEORGE TOUCHWOOD—or as she was known on the stage, Miss Eleanor Cartright—was big-boned, handsome, and hawklike, with the hungry look of the ambitious actress who is drawing near to forty—she was in fact thirty-seven—and realizes that the disappointed adventuresses of what are called strong plays are as near as she will ever get to the tragedy queens of youthful aspiration. Such an one accustomed to flash her dark eyes in defiance of a morally but not æsthetically hostile gallery and to have the whole of a stage for the display of what well-disposed critics hailed as vitality and cavillers condemned as lack of repose, such an one in John's tranquil library was, as Mrs. Worfolk put it, "rather too much of a good thing and no mistake"; and when Eleanor was there, John experienced as much malaise as he would have experienced from being shut up in a housemaid's closet with a large gramophone and the housemaid. This claustrophobia, however, was the smallest strain that his sister-in-law inflicted upon him; she affected his heart and his conscience more acutely, because he could never meet her without an emotion of guilt on account of his not yet having found a part for her in any of his plays, to which was added the fear he always felt in her presence that soon or late he should from sheer inability to hold out longer award her the leading part in his next play. George had often seriously annoyed him by his unwillingness to help himself; but at the thought of being married for thirteen years to Eleanor he had always excused his brother's flaccid dependence.

"George is a bit of a sponge," James had once said, "but Eleanor! Eleanor is the roughest and toughest loofah that was ever known. She is irritant and absorbent at the same time, and by gad, she has the appearance of a loofah."

The prospect of Eleanor's company at lunch on the morning after his return to town gave John a sensation of having escaped the devil to fall into the deep sea, of having jumped from the

## Poor Relations

frying-pan into the fire, in fact of illustrating a proverbial attempt to express the distinction of difference.

"It's a great pity that Eleanor didn't marry La thought. "Each would have kept the other well she could have played Mary Magdalene in that ins his. And, by Jove, if they *had* married, neither of have been a relation! Moreover, if Laurence had by Eleanor, Edith might never have married at all have kept house for me. And if Edith hadn't mightn't have married, and then Harold would been born."

John's hard pruning of his family-tree was in the sense of the house's having been attacked by an angel; illusion that he had learnt to connect with his sister's arrival. To make sure, however, he went out on a taxi and called down to know if anything was the matter.

"Mrs. George is having some trouble with the car," explained Maud, who was holding the front-door and looking apprehensively at the pictures that were on the walls in the wind.

"Why does she take taxis?" John muttered irritably. "I can't afford them, and there's no excuse for such extravagance when the tube is so handy."

At this moment Eleanor reached the door, on the top of which she turned like Medea upon Jason to have a word with the taxi-driver before the curtain fell.

"Did Mr. Touchwood get my message?" she was asked.

"Yes, yes," John called down. "I'm expecting you for lunch."

When he watched Eleanor all befurred coming up the stairs he felt not much less nervous than a hunter of big game faced with his first tiger; the landing seemed to wobble like a ship's deck; now he had fired and missed, and she was embracing him as usual. How many times at how many meetings with her had he tried unsuccessfully to dodge that kiss—which seemed improper whether because her lips were too full or because he could never decide, though he always felt when she kissed him that he ought to beg her husband's pardon.

## Chapter Five

MRS. GEORGE TOUCHWOOD—or as she was known on the stage, Miss Eleanor Cartright—was big-boned, handsome, and hawklike, with the hungry look of the ambitious actress who is drawing near to forty—she was in fact thirty-seven—and realizes that the disappointed adventuresses of what are called strong plays are as near as she will ever get to the tragedy queens of youthful aspiration. Such an one accustomed to flash her dark eyes in defiance of a morally but not æsthetically hostile gallery and to have the whole of a stage for the display of what well-disposed critics hailed as vitality and cavillers condemned as lack of repose, such an one in John's tranquil library was, as Mrs. Worfolk put it, "rather too much of a good thing and no mistake"; and when Eleanor was there, John experienced as much malaise as he would have experienced from being shut up in a housemaid's closet with a large gramophone and the housemaid. This claustrophobia, however, was the smallest strain that his sister-in-law inflicted upon him; she affected his heart and his conscience more acutely, because he could never meet her without an emotion of guilt on account of his not yet having found a part for her in any of his plays, to which was added the fear he always felt in her presence that soon or late he should from sheer inability to hold out longer award her the leading part in his next play. George had often seriously annoyed him by his unwillingness to help himself; but at the thought of being married for thirteen years to Eleanor he had always excused his brother's flaccid dependence.

"George is a bit of a sponge," James had once said, "but Eleanor! Eleanor is the roughest and toughest loofah that was ever known. She is irritant and absorbent at the same time, and by gad, she has the appearance of a loofah."

The prospect of Eleanor's company at lunch on the morning after his return to town gave John a sensation of having escaped the devil to fall into the deep sea, of having jumped from the

## Poor Relations

ying-pan into the fire, in fact of illustrating a proverbial attempt to express the distinction of difference.

"It's a great pity that Eleanor didn't marry Edith thought. "Each would have kept the other well as he could have played Mary Magdalene in that case is. And, by Jove, if they *had* married, neither of them would have been a relation! Moreover, if Laurence had been by Eleanor, Edith might never have married at all and would have kept house for me. And if Edith hadn't married, she mightn't have married, and then Harold would never have been born."

John's hard pruning of his family-tree was intense evidence of the house's having been attacked by an angry illusion that he had learnt to connect with his sister's arrival. To make sure, however, he went out on the street and called down to know if anything was the matter.

"Mrs. George is having some trouble with the car," explained Maud, who was holding the front door and looking apprehensively at the pictures that were hanging on the walls in the wind.

"Why does she take taxis?" John muttered irritably. "She can't afford them, and there's no excuse for such extravagance when the tube is so handy."

At this moment Eleanor reached the door, on the top of which she turned like Medea upon Jason to have a word with the taxi-driver before the curtain fell.

"Did Mr. Touchwood get my message?" she was asked.

"Yes, yes," John called down. "I'm expecting you for lunch."

When he watched Eleanor all befurred coming up the stairs he felt not much less nervous than a hunter of big game when he meets with his first tiger; the landing seemed to wobble like a ship on the sea; now he had fired and missed, and she was empty-handed as usual. How many times at how many meetings would he have had he tried unsuccessfully to dodge that kiss—which seemed improper whether because her lips were too full or because he could never decide, though he always felt when he released that he ought to beg her husband's pardon.



MRS. GEORGE TOUCHWOOD—or as she was known on the stage, Miss Eleanor Cartright—was big-boned, handsome, and hawklike, with the hungry look of the ambitious actress who is drawing near to forty—she was in fact thirty-seven—and realizes that the disappointed adventuresses of what are called strong plays are as near as she will ever get to the tragedy queens of youthful aspiration. Such an one accustomed to flash her dark eyes in defiance of a morally but not æsthetically hostile gallery and to have the whole of a stage for the display of what well-disposed critics hailed as vitality and cavillers condemned as lack of repose, such an one in John's tranquil library was, as Mrs. Worfolk put it, "rather too much of a good thing and no mistake"; and when Eleanor was there, John experienced as much malaise as he would have experienced from being shut up in a housemaid's closet with a large gramophone and the housemaid. This claustrophobia, however, was the smallest strain that his sister-in-law inflicted upon him; she affected his heart and his conscience more acutely, because he could never meet her without an emotion of guilt on account of his not yet having found a part for her in any of his plays, to which was added the fear he always felt in her presence that soon or late he should from sheer inability to hold out longer award her the leading part in his next play. George had often seriously annoyed him by his unwillingness to help himself; but at the thought of being married for thirteen years to Eleanor he had always excused his brother's flaccid dependence.

"George is a bit of a sponge," James had once said, "but Eleanor! Eleanor is the roughest and toughest loofah that was ever known. She is irritant and absorbent at the same time, and by gad, she has the appearance of a loofah."

The prospect of Eleanor's company at lunch on the morning after his return to town gave John a sensation of having escaped the devil to fall into the deep sea, of having jumped from the

## Poor Relations

frying-pan into the fire, in fact of illustrating a proverbial attempt to express the distinction of difference.

"It's a great pity that Eleanor didn't marry Laurence," thought. "Each would have kept the other well as she could have played Mary Magdalene in that part of his. And, by Jove, if they *had* married, neither of them would have been a relation! Moreover, if Laurence had been by Eleanor, Edith might never have married at all and have kept house for me. And if Edith hadn't married, she mightn't have married, and then Harold would not have been born."

John's hard pruning of his family-tree was in the sense of the house's having been attacked by an angelic illusion that he had learnt to connect with his own arrival. To make sure, however, he went out on the street and called down to know if anything was the matter.

"Mrs. George is having some trouble with the car," explained Maud, who was holding the front door and looking apprehensively at the pictures that were on the walls in the wind.

"Why does she take taxis?" John muttered irritably. "I can't afford them, and there's no excuse for such extravagance when the tube is so handy."

At this moment Eleanor reached the door, on the other side of which she turned like Medea upon Jason to have a word with the taxi-driver before the curtain fell.

"Did Mr. Touchwood get my message?" she was asked.

"Yes, yes," John called down. "I'm expecting you for lunch."

When he watched Eleanor all befurred coming up the stairs he felt not much less nervous than a hunter of big game faced with his first tiger; the landing seemed to wobble under his feet; now he had fired and missed, and she was emboldened as usual. How many times at how many meetings with her had he tried unsuccessfully to dodge that kiss—which seemed improper whether because her lips were too full he could never decide, though he always felt well released that he ought to beg her husband's pardon.

"You were an old beast not to come and see us when you got back from America; but never mind, I'm awfully glad to see you, all the same."

"Thank you very much, Eleanor. Why are you glad?"

"Oh, you sarcastic old bear!" *amusing*

This perpetual suggestion of his senility was another trick of Eleanor's that he deplored; dash it, he was two years younger than George, whom she called Georgieboy.

"No, seriously," Eleanor went on. "I was just going to wire and ask if I could send the kiddies down to the country. Lambton wants me for a five weeks tour before Xmas, and I can't leave them with Georgie. You see, if this piece catches on, it means a good shop for me in the new year."

"Yes, I quite understand your point of view," John said. "But what I don't understand is why Bertram and Viola can't stay with their father."

"But George is ill. Surely you got my letter?"

"I didn't realize that the presence of his children might prove fatal. However, send them down to Ambles by all means."

"Oh, but I'd much rather not after the way Hilda wrote to me, and now that you've come back there's no need."

"I don't quite understand."

"Well, you won't mind having them here for a short visit? Then they can go down to Ambles for the Christmas holidays."

"But the Christmas holidays won't begin for at least five weeks."

"I know."

"But you don't propose that Bertram and Viola should spend five weeks here?"

"They'll be no bother, you old crosspatch. Bertram will be at school all day, and I suppose that Maud or Elsa will always be available to take Viola to her dancing-lessons. You remember the dancing-lessons you arranged for?"

"I remember that I accepted the arrangement," said John.

"Well, she's getting on divinely, and it would be a shame to interrupt them just now, especially as she's in the middle of

## Poor Relations

a Spanish series. Her *cachucha* is . . ." Eleanor blow a kiss to express what Viola's *cachucha* was. of course I had a Spanish grandmother."

When John regarded her barbaric personality he credited her with being the granddaughter of a cann

"So I thought that her governess could come morning just as easily as to Earl's Court. In fact it convenient or at any rate equally convenient for she lives at Kilburn."

"I daresay it will be equally convenient for the said John sardonically. ~~wasn't it~~

"And I thought," Eleanor continued, "that it good opportunity for Viola to have French lessons noon. You won't want to have her all the time the French governess can give the children their be good for Bertram's accent."

"I don't doubt that it will be superb for Ber but I absolutely decline to have a French gover in and out of my house. It's bound to make in the servants who always think that French gov designing and licentious, and I don't want to impression."

"Well, aren't you an old prude? Who would that you had any sort of connection with the sta way, you haven't told me if there'll be anything f next."

"Well, at present the subject of my next play . . . and as for the caste . . ."

John was so nearly on the verge of offering of Agnes Sorel, for which she would be as suitable that in order to effect an immediate diversion when the children were to arrive.

"Let me see, to-day's Saturday. To-morrow I Bristol, where we open. They'd better come to-ni to-morrow being Sunday they'll have no lessons give them time to settle down. Georgie will be they're with you."

"I've no doubt he'll be enchanted," John agree  
The bell sounded for lunch, and they went down

"I've got to be back at the theatre by two," Eleanor announced, looking at the horribly distorted watch upon her wrist. "I wonder if we mightn't ask Maud to open half-a-bottle of champagne? I'm dreadfully tired."

John ordered a bottle to be opened; he felt rather tired himself.

"Let us be quite clear about this arrangement," he began, when after three glasses of wine he felt less appalled by the prospect and had concluded that Bertram and Viola would not together be as bad as Laurence with his play; not to mention Harold with his spectacles and entomology, his interrogativeness and his greed. "The English governess will arrive every morning for Viola. What is her name?"

"Miss Coldwell."

"Miss Coldwell then will be responsible for Viola all the morning. The French governess is cancelled; and I shall come to an arrangement with Miss Coldwell by which she will add to her salary by undertaking all responsibility for Viola until Viola is in bed. Bertram will go to school, and I shall rely upon Miss Coldwell to keep an eye on his behaviour at home."

"And don't forget the dancing-lessons."

"No, I had Madame What's-her-name's account last week."

"I mean, don't forget to arrange for Viola to go."

"That pilgrimage will I hope form a part of what Miss Coldwell would probably call 'extras.' And after all perhaps George will soon be fit."

"The poor old boy has been awfully seedy all the summer."

"What's he suffering from? Infantile paralysis?"

"It's all very well for you to joke about it, but you don't live in a wretched boarding-house in Earl's Court. You mustn't let success spoil you, John. It's so easy when everything comes your way to forget the less fortunate people. Look at me. I'm thirty-four, you know."

"Are you really? I should never have thought it."

"I don't mind your laughing at me, you old crab. But I don't like you to laugh at Georgie."

"I never do," John said. "I don't suppose that there's anybody alive who takes George as seriously as I do."

## Poor Relations

Eleanor brushed away a tear and said she must the rehearsal.

When she was gone John felt that he had and he reproached himself for letting Laurence cynical.

"The fact is," he told himself, "that ever Miss Hamilton make that remark in the saloon *mania*, I've become suspicious of my family. She then by ill luck I was thrown too much with Laurence clinched it. Eleanor is right: I *am* letting myself by success. After all, there's no reason why those shouldn't come here. *They* won't be writing apostles. I'll send George a box of cigars to show mean to sneer at him. And why didn't I call Eleanor's taxi? Yes, I am getting spoilt. I myself. And I ought not to have joked about age."

Luckily his sister-in-law had finished the champagne. John had drunk another glass he might have a part of the Maid herself.

The actual arrival of Bertram and Viola passed successfully. They were both presentable, and almost flattered when Mrs. Worfolk commented on his likeness to him, remembering what a nightmare it seemed when Hilda used to excavate points of difference between him and Harold. Mrs. Worfolk herself was pleased to have him back from Ambles that she was of good humours, and even the statuesque Maud looked life like some Galatea.

"I do think Maud's a darling, don't you, Uncle," exclaimed Viola.

"We all much appreciate Maud's—er—capabilities," he hemmed.

He felt that it was a silly answer, but inasmuch as he was present at the time he could not, either for his sake or hers, give an unconditional affirmative.

"I swopped four blood-allies for an Indian in the States," Bertram announced.

"With an Indian, my boy, I suppose you mean."

"No, I don't. I mean for an Indian—an Indian marble. And I swopped four Guatemalas for two Nicaraguas."

"You ought to be at the Foreign Office."

"But the ripping thing is, Uncle John, that two of the Guatemalas are fudges."

"Such a doubtful coup would not debar you from a diplomatic career."

"And I say, what is the Foreign Office? We've got a French chap in my class."

"You ask for an explanation of the Foreign Office. That, my boy, might puzzle the omniscience of the Creator."

"I say, I don't twig very well what you're talking about."

"The attributes of the Foreign Office, my boy, are rigidity where there should be suppleness, weakness where there should be firmness, and for intelligence the substitution of hair brushed back from the forehead."

"I say, you're ragging me, aren't you? No, really, what is the Foreign Office?"

"It is the ultimate preserve of a privileged imbecility."

Bertram surrendered, and John congratulated himself upon the possession of a nephew whose perseverance and curiosity had been sapped by schoolmasters.

"Harold would have tackled me word by word during one of our walks. I shall enter into negotiations with Hilda at Christmas to provide for his mental training on condition that I choose the school. Perhaps I shall hear of a good one in the Shetland Islands."

When Mrs. Worfolk visited John as usual at ten o'clock to wish him good-night, she was enthusiastic about Bertram and Viola.

"Well, really, sir, if yaul pardon the liberty, I must say I wouldn't never of believed that Mrs. George's children *could* be so quiet and nice-behaved. They haven't given a bit of trouble, and I've never heard Maud speak so highly of anyone as of Miss Viola. 'That child's a regular little angel, Mrs. Worfolk,' she said to me. Well, sir, I'm bound to say that children does brighten up a house. I'm sure I've done my best what with putting flowers in all the yawses and one thing and

## Poor Relations

another, but really . . . well, I'm quite taken with my nephew and niece, and I've had some experience mean to say, what with my poor sister's Hei-  
*have* put the tantalus ready. Good night, sir."

"The fact of the matter is," John assured her, "when I'm alone with them I can manage children. I only hope that Miss Coldwell will fall in with me. If he does, I see no reason why we shouldn't spend a pleasant time all together."

Unfortunately for John's hope of a satisfaction with the governess he received a hurried note by post from his sister-in-law next morning to say that he was laid up: the precise disease was illegible in the communication, but it was serious enough to keep him well at home for three weeks. "*Meanwhile,*" Eleanor said, "*she is trying to get her sister to come down from*" the of the sister was equally illegible. "*But the most thing is,*" Eleanor went on, "*that little V. should. dancing-lessons. So will you arrange for Maud to go on Tuesday and Friday? And of course if there's anything you want to know, there's always George.*"

Of George's eternal being John had no doubt. In knowledge he was less sanguine: the only thing that he had ever known really well was the moment to lead her. "However," said John in consultation with his brother, "I daresay we shall get along."

"Oh, certainly we shall, sir," Mrs. Worfolk proclaimed, "well, I mean to say, I've been a help to myself."

John bowed his appreciation of this fact.

"And though I never had the happiness to have my own toddlers of my own, anyone being married gets a little idea of having children. There's always the possibility, might say. It isn't like as if I was an old maid, though my husband died in Jubilee year."

"Did he, Mrs. Worfolk, did he?"

"Yes, sir, he planed off his thumb when he was one of the benches for the stands through him looking at a black fellow in a turban covered in jewels."

*Worfolk*



driving to Buckingham Palace. One of the new arrivals, it was; and his arm got blood poisoning. That's how I remember it was Jubilee year, though usually I'm a terror for knowing when anything did occur. He wouldn't of minded so much, he said, only he was told it was the Char of Persia and that made him mad."

"Why? What had he got against the Shah?"

"He hadn't got nothing against the Char. But it wasn't the Char; and if he'd of known it wasn't the Char he never wouldn't of turned round so quick, and there's no saying he wouldn't of been alive to this day. No, sir, don't you worry about this governess. I daresay if she'd of come she'd only of caused a bit of unpleasantness all round."

At the same time, John thought, when he sent for the children in order to make the announcement of Miss Coldwell's desertion, notwithstanding Mrs. Worfolk's optimism it was a pity that the first day of their visit should be a Sunday.

"I'm sorry to say, Viola, and of course, Bertram, this applies equally to you, that poor Miss Coldwell has been taken very ill."

That strange expression upon the children's faces might be an awkward attempt to express their youthful sympathy, but it more ominously resembled a kind of gloating ecstasy, as they stood like two cherubs outside the gates of paradise or two children outside a bunshop.

"Very ill," John went on, "so ill indeed that it is feared she will not be able to come for a few days, and so . . ."

Whatever more John would have said was lost in the riotous acclamations with which Bertram and Viola greeted the sad news. After the first cries and leaps of joy had subsided to a chanted duet, which ran somehow like this:

"Oh, oh, Miss Coldwell,  
She can't come to Hampstead,  
Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah,  
Miss Coldwell's not coming:"

John ventured to rebuke the singers for their insensibility to human suffering.

"For she may be dangerously ill," he protested.

"How fizzing," Bertram shouted.

## *Poor Relations*

"She might die."

The prospect that this opened before Bertram was as too beautiful for any verbal utterance, and he remained mouthed in a mute and exquisite anticipation of liberty.

"What and never come to us ever again?" Viola asked, her blue eyes aglow with visions of a larger life.

John shook his head gravely.

"Oh, Uncle John," she cried, "wouldn't that be glad?"

Bertram's heart was too full for words: he simply bowed his head over heels.

"But you hard-hearted little beasts," their uncle retorted.

"She's most frightfully strict," Viola explained.

"Yes, we shouldn't have been able to do anything if she'd come," Bertram added.

A poignant regret for that unknown governess suffered by her illegible complaint pierced John's mind. But perhaps she would recover, in which case she should spend her time at Ambles with Harold; for if when in good health she was strict, after a severe illness she might be ferocious.

"Well, I'm not at all pleased with your attitude," he declared. "And you'll find me twice as strict as I am now."

"Oh no, we shan't," said Bertram with a smile of incredulity.

John let the contradiction pass: it seemed an unimportant subject for debate. "And now to-day being Sunday, I'd better get ready for church."

"Oh, but we always dress up on Sunday," Viola protested.

"So does everybody," their uncle replied. "I'm already ready."

The children left the room, and he rang for Mr. Maud.

"Master Bertram and Miss Viola will shortly be at church, and I want you to arrange for something to do with them."

Mrs. Worfolk hesitated.

"Who was you thinking of, sir?"

"I wasn't thinking of anybody in particular, but Maud could go."

"Maud has her rooms to do."

"Well, Elsa."

"Elsa has her dinner to get."

"Well, then, perhaps you would . . ."

"Yaul pardon the liberty, sir, but I never go to church except of an evening *sometimes*; I never could abide being stared at."

"Oh, very well," said John fretfully, as Mrs. Worfolk retired. "Though I'm hanged if I'm going to take them," he added to himself, "at any rate without a rehearsal."

The two children soon came back in a condition of complete preparation and insisted so loudly upon their uncle's company that he yielded; though when he found himself with a child on either side of him in the Sabbath calm of the Hampstead streets footfall-haunted he was appalled at his rashness. There was a church close to his own house, but with an instinct to avoid anything like a domestic scandal he had told his nephew and niece that it was not a suitable church for children, and had led them further afield through the ghostly November sunlight.

"But look here," Bertram objected, "we can't go down any slums, you know, because the cads will bung things at my topper."

"Not if you're with me," John argued. "I am wearing a top-hat myself."

"Well, they did when I went for a walk with Father once on Sunday."

"The slums round Earl's Court are probably more primitive than the slums round Hampstead," John suggested. "And anyway here we are."

He had caught a glimpse of an ecclesiastical building, which turned out to be a Jewish tabernacle and not open: a few minutes later, however, an indubitably Anglican place of worship invited their attendance, and John trying not to look as bewildered as he felt let himself be conducted by a sidesman to the very front pew.

"I wonder if he thinks I'm a member of parliament. But I wish to goodness he'd put us in the second row. I shall be absolutely lost where I am."

## Poor Relations

John looked round to catch the sidesman's eye and a less conspicuous position, but even as he turned a terrific crash from the organ proclaimed that it was to that the service had begun.

By relying upon memories of youthful worship John had been able to cope successfully with Morning even with that florid variation of it which is general as Mattins. Unluckily the church he had chosen for spiritual encouragement of his nephew and niece was a church of his recollections as Mount Ararat to a simple spectator without encumbrances he might have enjoyed the service and derived considerable inspiration from the decorative ecclesiasticism of his new playmate. But it alarmed and confused him. The lace-hung candles, the chrysanthemums, the purple vestments, the ticking of the thurible affected him neither with Protestant disgust nor with Catholic devoutness, but much more as incentives to the unanswerable enquiries of his niece Viola.

"What are they doing?" whispered his nephew.

"Hush!" he whispered back in what he tried to be the right intonation of pious reproof.

"What's that little boy doing with a spoon?" asked his niece.

"Hush!" John blew forth again. "Attend to the

"But it isn't a real service, is it?" she persisted.

Luckily the congregation knelt at this point, and John plunged down with a delighted sense of taking cover. But he began to be afraid that his attitude of devotional abasement might be seeming a little ostentatious, and he cautiously round over the top of the pew; to his surprise he perceived that Bertram and Viola were still standing.

"Kneel down at once," he commanded in what would be an authoritative whisper, but which resulted in an agonized croak.

"I want to see what they're doing," both children protested.

Bertram's Etons appeared too much attenuated for tug, nor did John feel courageous enough in the front

jerk Viola down upon her knees by pulling her petticoats, which might come off. He therefore covered his face with his hands in what was intended to look like a spasm of acute reverence and growled at them both to kneel down, unless they wanted to be sent back instantly to Earl's Court. Evidently impressed by this threat the children knelt down; but they were no sooner upon their knees than the perverse congregation rose to its feet, the concerted movement taking John so completely unawares that he was left below and felt when he did rise like a naughty boy who has been discovered hiding under a table. He was not put at ease by Viola's asking him to find her place in the prayer-book; it seemed to him terrible to discern the signs of a vindictive spirit in one so young.

"Hush," he whispered. "You must remember that we're in the front row and must be careful not to disturb the——" he hesitated at the word "performers" and decided to envelop whatever they were in a cough.

There were no more question for a while, nothing indeed but tiptoe fidgetings until two acolytes advanced with lighted candles to a position on each side of the deacon who was preparing to read the Gospel.

"Why can't he see to read?" Bertram asked. "It's not dark."

"Hush," John whispered. "This is the Gospel."

He knew he was safe in affirming so much, because the announcement that he was about to read the Gospel had been audibly given out by the deacon. At this point the congregation crossed its innumerable features three times, and Bertram began to giggle; immediately afterward fumes poured from the swung censer, and Viola began to choke. John felt that it was impossible to interrupt what was presumably considered the *pièce de resistance* of the service by leading the two children out along the whole length of the church; yet he was convinced that if he did not lead them out their gigglings and snortings would have a disastrous effect upon the soloist. Then he had a brilliant idea: Viola was obviously much upset by the incense, and he would escort her out into fresh air with the solicitude that one gives to a sick person: Bertram he should leave behind to giggle alone. He watched his nephew

## Poor Relations

bending lower and lower to contain his mirth; with propulsive gesture he hurried Viola into the aisle. Fortunately when with a sigh of relief he stood upon outside and put on his hat he found that in his coat had brought out Bertram's hat, which on his intellect felt like a precariouly balanced inkpot; and though to abandon Bertram to his well merited fate he could himself to walk up Fitzjohn's Avenue in Bertram's could he even contemplate with equanimity the Bertram's walking up under his. Had it been a either of them might have passed for an eccentric ment, but on a Sunday. . . .

"And if I stand on the steps of a church holding that hat in my hand," he thought, "people will think I'm for some charity. Confound that boy! And I can't that I'm feeling too hot in the middle of November that boy! And I certainly can't wear it. A Japanese wouldn't be able to wear it. Damn that boy!"

Yet John would rather have gone home in a huff than enter the church again, and the best that could was that Bertram dismayed at finding himself alone soon emerge. Bertram, however, did not emerge, had a sudden fear lest in his embarrassment he might escaped by another door and was even now rushing home. Blindly was the right adverb indeed, for he certainly be unable to see anything from under that hat. Viola, having recovered from her choking fit, cry at this point, and an old lady who must have no tender approval John's exit came out with a bottle of salts, which she begged him to make use of. Before it decline she had gone back inside the church leaving him the bottle. If he could have forced the contents down his throat without attracting more attention he would have so, but by this time one or two passers-by had stopped at the scene, and he heard one of them tell his companion it was a street conjurer just going to perform.

"Will anything make you stop crying?" he asked in despair.

"I want Bertram," she wailed.

jerk Viola down upon her knees by pulling her petticoats, which might come off. He therefore covered his face with his hands in what was intended to look like a spasm of acute reverence and growled at them both to kneel down, unless they wanted to be sent back instantly to Earl's Court. Evidently impressed by this threat the children knelt down; but they were no sooner upon their knees than the perverse congregation rose to its feet, the concerted movement taking John so completely unawares that he was left below and felt when he did rise like a naughty boy who has been discovered hiding under a table. He was not put at ease by Viola's asking him to find her place in the prayer-book; it seemed to him terrible to discern the signs of a vindictive spirit in one so young.

"Hush," he whispered. "You must remember that we're in the front row and must be careful not to disturb the——" he hesitated at the word "performers" and decided to envelop whatever they were in a cough.

There were no more question for a while, nothing indeed but tiptoe fidgetings until two acolytes advanced with lighted candles to a position on each side of the deacon who was preparing to read the Gospel.

"Why can't he see to read?" Bertram asked. "It's not dark."

"Hush," John whispered. "This is the Gospel."

He knew he was safe in affirming so much, because the announcement that he was about to read the Gospel had been audibly given out by the deacon. At this point the congregation crossed its innumerable features three times, and Bertram began to giggle; immediately afterward fumes poured from the swung censer, and Viola began to choke. John felt that it was impossible to interrupt what was presumably considered the *pièce de résistance* of the service by leading the two children out along the whole length of the church; yet he was convinced that if he did not lead them out their gigglings and snortings would have a disastrous effect upon the soloist. Then he had a brilliant idea: Viola was obviously much upset by the incense, and he would escort her out into fresh air with the solicitude that one gives to a sick person: Bertram he should leave behind to giggle alone. He watched his nephew

## Poor Relations

bending lower and lower to contain his mirth; with propulsive gesture he hurried Viola into the aisle. Fortunately when with a sigh of relief he stood upon outside and put on his hat he found that in his coat had brought out Bertram's hat, which on his intellect felt like a precariously balanced inkpot; and though to abandon Bertram to his well merited fate he could not, himself to walk up Fitzjohn's Avenue in Bertram's hat, could he even contemplate with equanimity the sight of Bertram's walking up under his. Had it been a matter of either of them might have passed for an eccentric experiment, but on a Sunday. . . .

"And if I stand on the steps of a church holding that hat in my hand," he thought, "people will think I'm doing for some charity. Confound that boy! And I can't wear that I'm feeling too hot in the middle of November. Confound that boy! And I certainly can't wear it. A Japanese wouldn't be able to wear it. Damn that boy!"

Yet John would rather have gone home in a baby carriage than enter the church again, and the best that could be done was that Bertram dismayed at finding himself alone should soon emerge. Bertram, however, did not emerge, but had a sudden fear lest in his embarrassment he might be escaped by another door and was even now rushing home. Blindly was the right adverb indeed, for John was certainly be unable to see anything from under that hat. Viola, having recovered from her choking fit, began to cry at this point, and an old lady who must have noticed with tender approval John's exit came out with a bottle of salts, which she begged him to make use of. Before she could decline she had gone back inside the church leaving John with the bottle. If he could have forced the contents down his throat without attracting more attention he would have done so, but by this time one or two passers-by had stopped at the scene, and he heard one of them tell his companion that it was a street conjurer just going to perform.

"Will anything make you stop crying?" he asked, in despair.

"I want Bertram," she wailed.



And at that moment Bertram appeared, led out by two sidesmen.

"Your little boy doesn't know how to behave himself in church," one of them informed John severely.

"I was only looking for my hat," Bertram explained. "I thought it had rolled into the next pew. Let go of my arm. I slipped off the hassock. I couldn't help making a little noise, Uncle John."

John was grateful to Bertram for thus exonerating him publicly from the responsibility of having begotten him, and he enquired almost kindly what had happened.

"The hassock slipped, and I fell into the next pew."

"I'm sorry my nephew made a noise," said John to the sidesman. "My niece was taken ill, and he was left behind by accident. Thank you for showing him the way out, yes. Come along, Bertram, I've got your hat. Where's mine?"

Bertram looked blankly at his uncle.

"Do you mean to say——" John began, and then he saw a passing taxi to which he shouted.

"Those smelling-salts belong to an old lady," he explained hurriedly and quite inadequately to the bewildered sidesman into whose hands he had thrust the bottle. "Come along," he urged the children, and when they were scrambling into the taxi he called back to the sidesmen. "You can give to the jumble sale any hat that is swept up after the service."

Inside the taxi John turned to the children.

"One would think you'd never been inside a church before," he said reproachfully.

"Bertram," said Viola, in bland oblivion of all that her uncle had endured, "when we dress up to-day shall we act going to church or finish Robinson Crusoe?"

"Wait till we see what we can find for dressing up," Bertram advised.

John displayed a little anxiety.

"Dressing up?" he repeated.

"We always dress up every Sunday," the children burst forth in unison.

"Oh, I see—it's a kind of habit. Well, I daresay Mrs. Worfolk will be able to find you an old duster or something."

## Poor Relations

"Duster," echoed Viola scornfully. "That's no for dressing up."

"I didn't suggest a duster as anything but a supply your ordinary costume. I didn't anticipate that going to rely entirely upon the duster."

"I say, V, can you twig what Uncle John says?"

Viola shook her head.

"Nor more can I," said Bertram sympathetically.

Before the taxi reached Church Row John fell adopting a positively deferential manner towards him and his niece, and when they were once again back in house, the hall of which was faintly savoury with lunch, he asked them if they would mind amusing for an hour while he wrote some letters.

"For I take it you won't want to dress up," he added as an excuse for attending to his own business.

The children confirmed his supposition, but inform him that the domanical regime at Earl's scribed a walk after church.

"Owing to the accident to my hat I'm afraid you to let me off this morning."

"Right-o," Bertram agreed cheerfully. "But come up and sit with you while you write your letters are a beastly fag, don't you?"

John felt that the boy was proffering his own company in a spirit of altruism, and he could enough gracelessness to decline the proposal. So all went.

"I think this is rather a ripping room, don't you?"

"The carpet's very old," said Viola.

"Have you got any decent books?" Bertram looking round at the shelves. "Any Henty anything?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," said John apologetically.

"Or bound up *Boys' Own Papers*?"

John shook his head.

"But I'll tell you what I have got," he added inspiration. "Kingsley's *Heroes*."

"Is that a pi book?" asked Bertram suspiciously.

"Not at all. It's about Greek gods and goddesses, essentially broad-minded divinities."

"Right-o. I'll have a squint at it, if you like," Bertram volunteered. "Come on, V, don't start showing off your rotten dancing. Come and look at this book. It's got some spiffing pictures."

"Lunch won't be very long," John announced in order to propitiate any impatience at what they might consider the boring entertainment he was offering.

Presently the two children left their uncle alone, and he observed with pride that they took with them the book. He little thought that so mild a dose of romance as could be extracted from Kingsley's *Heroes* would before the twilight of that November day run through 36 Church Row like fire. But then John did not know that there was a calf's head for dinner that night; he had not realized the scenic capacity of the cistern cupboard at the top of the house; and most of all he had not associated with dressing up on Sunday afternoon the histrionic force that Bertram and Viola inherited from their mother.

"Is it *Androméda* or *Andrómeda*?" Bertram asked at lunch.

"*Andrómeda*, my boy," John answered. "Perseus and *Andrómeda*."

"I think it would make a jolly good play, don't you?" Bertram went on.

Really, thought John, this nephew was a great improvement upon that spectacled inquisitor at Ambles.

"A capital play," he agreed heartily. "Are you thinking of writing it?"

"V and I thought we'd do it instead of finishing Robinson Crusoe. Well, you see, you haven't got any decent fur rugs, and V's awfully stupid about having her face blacked."

"It's my turn not to be a savage," Viola pleaded in defence of her squeamishness.

"I said you could be Will Atkins as well. I know I'd jolly well like to be Will Atkins myself."

"All right," Viola offered. "You can, and I'll be Robinson."

"You can't change like that in the middle of a play," her brother argued.

## *Poor Relations*

John who appreciated both Viola's dislike of burn and Bertram's æsthetic objection to changing parts in of a piece, strongly recommended Perseus and And.

"Of course you got the idea from Kingsley, Bertram," he said beaming with cordial patronage.

"And I suppose," his nephew went on, "that we played at the top of the house. I expect it would if you're writing letters. Mother said you often quiet." He alluded to this desire rather as if it were a secret vice of his uncle, who had chosen the choice of the top landing for the scene of drama.

"Then would you please tell Mrs. Worfolk that the calf's head?"

"The what?"

"V found a calf's head in the larder, and it fizzaing Gorgon's head, but Mrs. Worfolk would it."

John was so much delighted with the trend of genuinity that he sent for Mrs. Worfolk and told calf's head might be borrowed for the play.

"I'll take no responsibility for your dinner," keeper warningly.

"That's all right, Mrs. Worfolk. If any the head I shan't grumble. There'll always won't there?"

Mrs. Worfolk turned up her eyes to heaven room.

"Well, I think I've arranged that for you

"Thank you, Uncle John," said Bertram.

"Thank you, Uncle John," said Viola.

What nice quiet well-mannered children all; and he by no means ought to blame the churchgoing; the setting had of course unfamiliar; these ritualistic places of worship in an unexcitable country like England. J library and lit a Corona with a conviction deserved a good cigar.

"Children are not difficult," he said to

"Not at all. It's about Greek gods and goddesses, essentially broad-minded divinities."

"Right-o. I'll have a squint at it, if you like," Bertram volunteered. "Come on, V, don't start showing off your rotten dancing. Come and look at this book. It's got some spiffing pictures."

"Lunch won't be very long," John announced in order to propitiate any impatience at what they might consider the boring entertainment he was offering.

Presently the two children left their uncle alone, and he observed with pride that they took with them the book. He little thought that so mild a dose of romance as could be extracted from Kingsley's *Heroes* would before the twilight of that November day run through 36 Church Row like fire. But then John did not know that there was a calf's head for dinner that night; he had not realized the scenic capacity of the cistern cupboard at the top of the house; and most of all he had not associated with dressing up on Sunday afternoon the histrionic force that Bertram and Viola inherited from their mother.

"Is it Androméda or Andrómeda?" Bertram asked at lunch.

"Andrómeda, my boy," John answered. "Perseus and Andromeda."

"I think it would make a jolly good play, don't you?" Bertram went on.

Really, thought John, this nephew was a great improvement upon that spectacled inquisitor at Ambles.

"A capital play," he agreed heartily. "Are you thinking of writing it?"

"V and I thought we'd do it instead of finishing Robinson Crusoe. Well, you see, you haven't got any decent fur rugs, and V's awfully stupid about having her face blacked."

"It's my turn not to be a savage," Viola pleaded in defence of her squeamishness.

"I said you could be Will Atkins as well. I know I'd jolly well like to be Will Atkins myself."

"All right," Viola offered. "You can, and I'll be Robinso

"You can't change like that in the middle of a play," brother argued.

## Poor Relations

"There he goes again with his Gordon and his G," said Mrs. Worfolk. "How dare you be so daring?"

"The Gorgon's sister," cried Bertram lunging at the scimitar. "Beware, I am invisible."

Whereupon he enveloped the calf's head in a cloth the tea-tray before his face, and darted away up stairs.

"I'm afraid he's a little over-excited," said John.

At this moment a stream of water began to flow down and pour down upon him from the landing above.

"Why, the house is full of water," he gasped.

"It's what I'm trying to tell you, sir," Mrs. Worfolk said.

"He's done something with that there cistern and can't stop the water."

John followed Perseus on his wild flight up the stairs, which every moment water was flowing more freely from. As he reached the cistern cupboard he discovered it fast to the disordered cistern, while Viola holding a large ivory paper-knife and wearing what looked like Mrs. Worfolk's sealskin jacket that John had given her, was splashing at full length in a puddle on the floor at Maud's skirts with ferocious growls and grunts.

"You dare try to undress me again, Maud!" the statuesque Maud was screaming.

"Well, Andromeda's got practically nothing on and you said you'd rather not be the sea-monster," he was arguing. "Andromeda," he cried seeing by his uncle's advance that the curtain must now be pulled upon the play, "I have turned the monster to stone. You can't move from now on."

Viola stiffened and without a twitch let the water pour down upon her, while Bertram planting himself behind her small of her back waved triumphantly the scimitar. Both of whose ears gave way under the strain, and dinner was soon as wet as he was.

The cistern emptied itself at last; Maud, Bertram and Viola were led downstairs to be dried. Mrs. Worfolk's recommendation sent instantly to bed.

"I told you," said Bertram, "that if Miss Maud come, we couldn't have done anything decent."

What woman, John wondered, might serve as a comparable deterrent? The fantastic idea of appealing for aid to Miss Hamilton flashed through his mind, but on second thoughts he felt that there would be something undignified in asking her to come at such a moment. Then he remembered how often he had heard his sister-in-law Beatrice lament her childlessness. Why should he not visit James and Beatrice this very evening? He owed them a visit, and his domestics were all obviously too much agitated even to contemplate the preparation of dinner. Mrs. Worfolk would perhaps be in a better temper when he got back and he would explain to her that the seal was a marine animal the skin of which would not be injured by water.

"I think I'll ask Mrs. James to give us a helping hand this week," John suggested. "I shall be rather busy myself."

"Yes, sir, and so shall I, trying to get the house straight again which it looks more like Shooting the Chutes at Earl's Court than a gentleman's house I'm bound to say."

"Still it might have been worse, Mrs. Worfolk. They might have played with another element. Fire for instance. That would have been much more awkward."

"And it's thanks to me the house isn't on fire as well," Mrs. Worfolk shrilled in her indignation. "For if that young Turk didn't come charging down into the kitchen and trying to tell me that the kitchen-fire was a serpent and start attacking it tooth and nail. And there was poor Elsa shut up in the coal-cellar and hollering fit to break anyone's heart. 'She's Daniel in a tower of brass,' he says as bold as a tower of brass himself."

"And what were you, Mrs. Worfolk?" John asked.

"Oh, his lordship had the nerve to say I was an atlas. 'Yes,' I said, 'my lord, you let me catch hold of you and I'll make your behind look like an atlas before I've done with it.'"

"Do you think that Mrs. James could control them?" John asked.

"I wouldn't say as the Lord Mayor himself could control them, but it's not for me to give advice when good food can be turned into Gordon's heads. And whatever give them the idea I don't know, for I'm sure General Gordon was a very

## *Poor Relations*

handsome man to look at. Yaul excuse me, sir, don't want to catch your death, you'd better things."

John followed Mrs. Worfolk's advice, and an he was walking through the misty November night in of St. John's Wood.



What woman, John wondered, might serve as a comparable deterrent? The fantastic idea of appealing for aid to Miss Hamilton flashed through his mind, but on second thoughts he felt that there would be something undignified in asking her to come at such a moment. Then he remembered how often he had heard his sister-in-law Beatrice lament her childlessness. Why should he not visit James and Beatrice this very evening? He owed them a visit, and his domestics were all obviously too much agitated even to contemplate the preparation of dinner. Mrs. Worfolk would perhaps be in a better temper when he got back and he would explain to her that the seal was a marine animal the skin of which would not be injured by water.

"I think I'll ask Mrs. James to give us a helping hand this week," John suggested. "I shall be rather busy myself."

"Yes, sir, and so shall I, trying to get the house straight again which it looks more like Shooting the Chutes at Earl's Court than a gentleman's house I'm bound to say."

"Still it might have been worse, Mrs. Worfolk. They might have played with another element. Fire for instance. That would have been much more awkward."

"And it's thanks to me the house isn't on fire as well," Mrs. Worfolk shrilled in her indignation. "For if that young Turk didn't come charging down into the kitchen and trying to tell me that the kitchen-fire was a serpent and start attacking it tooth and nail. And there was poor Elsa shut up in the coal-cellar and hollering fit to break anyone's heart. 'She's Daniel in a tower of brass,' he says as bold as a tower of brass himself."

"And what were you, Mrs. Worfolk?" John asked.

"Oh, his lordship had the nerve to say I was an atlas. 'Yes,' I said, 'my lord, you let me catch hold of you and I'll make your behind look like an atlas before I've done with it.'"

"Do you think that Mrs. James could control them?" John asked.

"I wouldn't say as the Lord Mayor himself could control them, but it's not for me to give advice when good food can be turned into Gordon's heads. And whatever give them the idea I don't know, for I'm sure General Gordon was a very

## *Poor Relations*

handsome man to look at. Yaul excuse me, sir, don't want to catch your death, you'd better things."

John followed Mrs. Worfolk's advice, and an' was walking through the misty November night in t' of St. John's Wood.

## Chapter Six

**I**F a taxi had lurked in any of the melancholy streets through which John was making his way to Hill Road he would have taken refuge in it gratefully, for there was no atmosphere that preyed upon his mind with such a sense of desolation as the hour of evening prayer in a respectable Northern suburb. The occasional footsteps of uninspired lovers dying away into by-streets; the occasional sounds of stuffy worship proceeding from church or chapel; the occasional bark of a dog trying to obtain admittance to an empty house; the occasional tread of a morose policeman; the occasional hoot of a distant motor-horn; the occasional whiff of privet-shrubberies and of damp rusty railings; the occasional effusions of chlorotic gaslight upon the raw air, half fog, half drizzle; the occasional shadows that quivered upon the dimly luminous blinds of upper windows; the occasional mutterings of housemaids in basements—not even John's buoyant spirit could rise above such a weight of depressing adjuncts to the influential Sabbath gloom.

He began to accuse himself of having been too hasty in his treatment of Bertram and Viola; the scene at Church Row viewed in retrospect seemed to him cheerful and, if the water had not reached his Anbusson, harmless. No doubt, in the boarding-house at Earl's Court such behaviour had been considered impossible. Had not the children talked of finishing Robinson Crusoe and alluded to his own lack of suitable fur rugs? Evidently last week the drama had been interrupted by the landlady because they had been spoiling her fur rugs. John was on the point of going back to Church Row and inviting the children to celebrate his return in a jolly impromptu supper, when he remembered that there were at least four more Sundays before Christmas. Next Sunday they would probably decide to revivify the Argonauts, a story that, so far as he could recall the incidents, offered many opportunities for destructive ingenuity. Then, the Sunday after, there would be Theseus and the

## Poor Relations

Minotaur; if there were another calf's head in +  
Bertram might easily try to compel Mrs. Worfolk to  
Minotaur and wear it, which might mean Mrs. Worfo  
nation from his service, a prospect that could not be f  
equanimity. But would the presence of Beatrice  
effective control upon this dressing up, and could  
Beatrice for five weeks at a stretch? He might of cou  
her to protect him and his property during the first  
and after that to come for every week end. Supp  
invite Miss Hamilton, but of course that was absurd  
he did invite Beatrice, would Miss Hamilton—woul  
come? Could it possibly be held to be one of th  
a confidential secretary to assist her employer in  
exuberance of his juvenile relations? Would not  
ton decide that her post approximated too nearly  
governess? Obviously such a woman had never  
the notion of becoming a governess. But had she  
plated the notion of becoming a confidential se  
no, the plan was fantastic, unreal . . . he must  
trice and hope that Miss Coldwell would pres  
or that Elcanor's tour would come to a sudden  
George would have paid what he owed his land  
better able to withstand her criticism of his  
these hopes proved unfounded, a schoolboy lik  
human nature had his price—his noiselessness  
in youth like his silence later on. John was tu  
Road when he made this reflection; he was v  
of James' cynical operations.

John's eldest brother was at forty-six an on  
improved, an inwardly much debased replica  
The old man had not possessed a winning pers  
energy and genuine powers of accomplishment  
successful general practitioner, because people  
rudeness in the confidence he gave them and  
of sympathy on account of an obvious de  
welfare. He with his sceptical and curious  
for mathematics and hatred of idealism, an  
contempt for the human race could not con  
in eternity than a general practice offered?

having married a vain, beautiful, lazy and conventional woman, he could not bring himself to spoil his honesty by blaming for the foolish act anything more tangible than the scheme of creation; and having made himself a damned uncomfortable bed with a pretty quilt, as he used to say, he had decided that he must lie on it. No doubt, many general practitioners go through life with the conviction that they were intended to devote themselves to original research; but Dr. Robert Touchwood from what those who were qualified to judge used to say of him had reason to feel angry with his fate.

James, who as a boy had shown considerable talent, was chosen by his father to inherit the practice. It was typical of the old gentleman that he did not assume this succession as the right of the eldest son, but that he deliberately awarded it to James as the most apparently adequate of his offspring. Unfortunately James, who was dyspeptic even at school, chose to imitate his father's mannerisms while he was still a student at Guy's and helping at odd hours in the dispensary. Soon after he had taken his finals and had seen his name engraved upon the brass plate underneath his father's, old Dr. Touchwood fell ill of an incurable disease, and James found himself in full charge of the practice, which he proceeded to ruin; so that not long after his father's death he was compelled to sell it for a much smaller sum than it would have fetched a few years before. For a time he played alternately with the plan of setting up as a specialist in Harley Street or of burying himself in the country to write a monograph on British dragon-flies—for some reason these fierce and brilliant insects touched a responsive chord in James. He finally decided upon the dragon-flies and went down to Ockham Common in Surrey to search for *Sympetrum Fonscolombii*, a rare migrant that was reported from that locality in 1892. He could not prove that it was any more indigenous than himself to that sophisticated county, but in the course of his observations he met Beatrice Pyke, the daughter of a prosperous inn-keeper in a neighbouring town, and married her. Notwithstanding such a catch—he used to vow that she was more resplendent than even *Anax Imperator*—he continued to take an interest in dragon-flies, until his monograph was unluckily forestalled a few years later. It was

## *Poor Relations*

owing to an article of his in one of the entomological that he encountered Daniel Curtis—a meeting which Hilda's marriage. In those days—John had not yet financial success of literature—this result had seemed embittered odonatist a complete justification of hours he had wasted in preparing for his never-to monograph, because his sister's future had for some presenting a disagreeable and insoluble problem. Observing dragon-flies, James spent one year in making out of fishbones, and another year in perfecting a applying gold lacquer to poker-work.

A more important hobby, however, that finally the others was foreign literature, in the criticism frequently occupied pages in the expensive that gradually grew numerous enough to make one and then another. James' articles on foreign literature always signed; but he also wrote many criticism literature that were not signed. This hack-work hurt him so much that he gradually came to despising English literature after the eighteenth century production of the novels of George Meredith. These he talked aloud to his wife when he was feeling particularly deride from her nervous bewilderment a savage. In her the critic possessed a perpetual insult to the British public that he so deeply scorned, and he treated in the same way as he fancied he treated the without either of them he would have been into a loose end. For all his admiration of French literature he spoke the language with a hideous British accent. On a joint holiday John, who for the whole of a year had been listening to his brother's tirades against the of modern English literature and his paeans on behalf of French literature, had been much consoled when he went to Calais to find that James could not make himself even to a porter.

"But," as John had said with a chuckle, "I couldn't have made himself intelligible to an

"It's the porter's fault," James had replied. For some years now the critic with his



## Poor Relations

Beyle snoring on his lap, where he served as a rest for book that his master was reading.

"Hullo," the critic exclaimed without attempting to rise. "You *are* back in town then?"

"Yes, I came back on Friday."

"I thought you wouldn't be able to stand the cold long. Remember what Horry Walpole said about the cold."

"Yes," said John quickly. He had not the least doubt but he had long ago ceased to have any scruples about using James first of all from trying to remember a name, secondly from trying to find it, thirdly from asking where she had hidden the book in which it was to be found, and finally from not only reading it when the book was found but also from reading page after page of irrelevant matter in the context. "Though Ambles is really very jolly, I'm expecting you and Beatrice to spend Christmas with me, you know."

James grunted. *muttered in a growl.*

"Well, we'll see about that. I don't belong to the Fellowship and I shall be pretty busy. You people soon forget what it means to be busy. So you've had success? Who was it this time—Lucretia Borgia?" he laughed bitterly. "Good lord, it's incredible, the English drama's in a sick state—a very sick state."

"All contemporary art is in a sick state according to critics," John observed. "Critics are like doctors, not prejudiced in favour of general good-health."

"Well, isn't it in a sick state?" James demanded.

"I don't know that I think it is. However, let's begin an argument before supper. Where's Beatrice?"

"She bought a new hat yesterday and has gone to the theatre to try to demonstrate its becomingness to God and woman."

"I suppose you mean she's gone to church?" John asked. "I went to church myself this morning."

"What for? Copy?"

"No, no, no. I took George's children."

"You don't mean to say that you've got *them*?"

John nodded, and his brother exploded with laughter.



"Well, I was fool enough to marry before I was thirty," he bellowed. "But at any rate I wasn't fool enough to have any children. So you're going to sup with us. I ought to warn you it's cold mutton to-night."

"Really? Capital! There's nothing I like better than cold mutton."

"Upon my soul, Johnnie, I'll say this for you, you may write stale romantic plays about the past, but you manage to keep plenty of romantic sauce for the present. Yes, you're a born optimist. Look at your skin—pink as a baby's. Look at mine—yellow as a horse's tooth. Have you heard my new name for your habit of mind? Rosification. Rather good, eh? And you can rosify anything from Lucretia Borgia to cold mutton. Now don't look angry with me, Johnnie; you must rosify my ill-humour. With so many roses you can't expect not to have a few thorns as well, and I'm one of them. No, seriously, I congratulate you on your success. And I always try to remember that you write with your tongue in your cheek."

"On the contrary I believe I write as well as I can," said John earnestly. "I admit that I gave up writing realistic novels, but that was because they didn't suit my temperament."

"No, by gad, they didn't! And anyway no Englishman *can* write a realistic novel—or any other kind of a novel if it comes to that. My lord, the English novel!"

"Look here," John protested. "I do not want to argue about either plays or novels to-night. But if you must talk about books, talk about your own, not mine. Beatrice wrote to me that you had something coming along about the French Symbolists. I shouldn't have thought that they would have appealed to you."

"They don't. I hate them."

"Well, why write a book about them? Their day has been over a long time."

"To smash them. To prove that they were a pretentious set of epileptic humbugs."

"Sort of Max Nordau business?"

"Max Nordau! I hope you aren't going to compare me

## Poor Relations

with that flat-footed bus-conductor. No, no, John, these rascals took themselves seriously and I'm going to go on their own estimate of their own importance. I'll prove that they were on the wrong track and led me no-

"It's consoling to learn that even French literature goes off the lines sometimes."

"Of course it can, because it runs on lines. English literature on the contrary never had any lines on which to go, though in the eighteenth century it followed a fair coaching-road. Modern English literature, however, is a rogue elephant trampling down the jungle of its predecessors made some attempt to cultivate."

"I never knew that even moral elephants had any sense in agriculture seriously."

James blew all the ashes of his pipe over Beyle in contempt, and rose from his chair.

"The smirk!" he cried. "The traditional British The gerumky-gerum horse-laugh! British humour Begotten by Punch out of Mrs. Grundy with the for godfather. *Go to, you have made me mad!*"

"It's a pity you can't tell me about your new book flying into a rage," John said mildly. "You have not yet when it's to appear."

"My fourteen readers aren't languishing. But politeness by politeness, my book will come out in time."

"I'm looking forward to it," John declared. "Did you get good terms from Worrall?"

"As good terms as a consumptive bankrupt might get from Shylock. What does the British public care for? You should hear me reading the proofs to Beaumont should really have the pleasure of watching her face as she goes on to her comments. Do you know why Beaumont is in church? I'll tell you. She goes to indulge in a debauch of accumulated yawns of the week."

"Hush, here she is," John warned him.

James laughed again.

"Johnnie, you're *impayable*. Your sensitiveness betrays the fount of your success. You treat the British public with just the same gentlemanly gurgle. And above

a good salesman. That's where George failed when he tri-  
whisky on commission."

"I don't believe you're half the misanthropist you  
yourself out."

"Of course I'm not. I love human nature. Didn't I marry  
Beatrice, and didn't I spend a year in making a clock out of  
fishbones to amuse my landlady's children, and wasn't I a  
doctor of medicine without once using my knowledge of  
poisons? I love mankind—but dragon-flies were more complex  
and dogs are more admirable. Well, Beatrice, did you enjoy  
the sermon?"

His wife had come in and was greeting John broadly and  
effusively, for when she was excited her loud contralto voice  
recaptured many rustic inflections of her youth. She was a tall  
woman, gaudily handsome, conserving in clothes and coiffure  
the fashions of her prime as queens use and barmaids who  
become the wives of publicans. On Sundays she wore a lilac  
broadcloth with a floriated bodice cut close to the figure; but  
she was just as proud of her waist on weekdays and as discreet  
about her legs, which she wrapped up in a number of petti-  
coats. She was as real or as unreal as a cabinet-photograph of  
the last decade of the nineteenth century: it depended on the  
attitude of the observer. Although there was too much of her  
for the apartments, it could not be said that she appeared  
out of place in them; in fact she was rather like a daughter  
of the house who had come home for the holidays.

"Why, it's John," she expanded in a voice rich with wel-  
come. "How are you, little stranger?"

"Thank you very much for the flowers, Beatrice. They  
were much appreciated."

"I wanted you to know that we were still in the land of the  
livin'. You're goin' to stay to supper, of course? But you'll  
have to be content with cold mutton, don't you know?"

There was a tradition among the novelists admired by Beatrice  
that well-bred people left out their final 'g's'; so she saved on  
these consonants what was squandered upon aspirates.

"And how do you think Jimmie's lookin'?" she went on.  
"I suppose he's told you about his new book. Comin' out in  
March, don't you know. I feel awfully up in French poetry

## Poor Relations

since he read it out to me. Don't light another pipe. The girl's gettin' the supper at once. I think you very well, Johnnie, I do indeed. Don't you think very well, Jimmie? Has Bill Bailey been out for This was Beatrice's affectionate diminutive for H the dog.

"No, I won't bother about my hands," John p to forestall Beatrice's next suggestion.

"We had such a dull sermon," she sighed.

Her husband grunted a request to spare them the

"Well, don't you know, it's a dull time for se before Christmas. But it didn't matter, as w wanted was a puff of fresh air. Yes, I'd begun to forgotten all about us," she rambled on, turning John. "I know we must be dull company, but no play, don't you know . . . yours is all plays and Jimmie, I made a joke," she laughed, twitching sleeve to secure his attention. "Did you hear?"

"Yes, I heard," he growled.

"I thought it was rather good, didn't you, Jc

"Very good indeed," he assented warmly. "T work occasionally."

"Oh, of course, you silly thing, I wasn't bein' told you it was a joke. I know you must work a comes the girl with supper. You'll excuse me, Joh I go and powder my nose. I shan't be a minute."

Beatrice retired to the bedroom whence she co humming over her beautification.

"You're not meditating marriage, are you?" Jam The bachelor shook his head.

"At the same time," he protested stoutly, "I d you're entitled to sneer at Beatrice. Consider was about to say "everything," but feeling that include his brother too pointedly he substituted, "th she's wonderfully cheerful. And you know I've aive that these rooms are cramped."

"Yes, well, when a popular success oils my palm, I move next door to you in Church Row."

John wished that James would not always ha

respective fortunes : it made him feel uncomfortable, especially when he was sitting down to cold mutton. Besides, it was unfair ; had he not once advised James to abandon criticism and take up—he had been going to suggest ‘ anything except literature,’ but he had noticed James’ angry dismay and had substituted ‘ creative work.’ What had been the result ? An outburst of contemptuous abuse, a violent renunciation of anything that approximated to his own work. If James despised his romantic plays, why could he not be consistent and despise equally the wealth they brought him ? He honoured his brother’s intellectual sincerity, why could not his brother do as much for his ?

“ What beats me,” the critic had once exclaimed, “ is how a man like you who professes to admire—no, I believe you’re honest—who does admire Stendhal, Turgenev, Flaubert, and Merimée, who recognizes the perfection of *Manon Lescaut* and *Adolphe*, who in a word has taste, can bring himself to eructate *The Fall of Babylon*.”

“ It’s all a matter of knowing one’s own limitations,” John had replied. “ I tried to write realistic novels. But my temperament is not realistic.”

“ No, if it were,” his brother had murmured, “ you wouldn’t stand my affectation of superiority.”

It was this way James had of once in a very long while putting himself in the wrong that used always to heal John’s wounded generosity. But these occasional lapses—as he supposed his cynical brother would call them—were becoming less and less frequent, and John had no longer much excuse for clinging to his romantic fondness for the unlucky head of his family.

During the first half of supper Beatrice delivered a kind of lecture on housekeeping in London on two pounds twelve shillings and sixpence a week, including bones for the dog ; by the time that the stewed figs were put on the table this monologue had reduced both brothers to such a state of gloom by striking at James’ experience and John’s imagination, that the sourness of the cream came as a natural corollary ; anything except sour cream would have seemed an obtrusive reminder of housekeeping on more than two pounds twelve shillings and

## Poor Relations

sixpence a week, including bones for the dog. convinced by his sister-in-law's mood that she won't get short rest from speculating upon the comparative value of mutton and beef, and by James' reception of her that he would appreciate her housekeeping all the while being compelled to regard for a while the long prospects that his landlady would inevitably marshal for him while his wife was away. The moment seemed propitious for the unfolding of his plan.

"I want to ask you both a favour," he began. Beatrice, I disagree with you. I don't think it's really sour. I find it delicious, but I daren't ever eat a few figs. The cream, however, is particularly good. In fact I was on the point of enquiring the name of your figs."

"If we have cream on Sundays," Beatrice said, "Jimmie has to put up with custard-powder on Sundays. But if we don't have cream on Sundays, I can eat eggs on Wednesdays for real custard."

"That's very ingenious of you," John dearest said. "You didn't hear what I was saying when I broke out of the cream, *which* is delicious. I said that I was in favour of you both."

"King Cophetua and the beggar maid," John said. "Or were you going to suggest to Beatrice that when she has supper with us she should experiment with fresh cream, but also with some rare dish like lamb's tongues—or even veal, for instance?"

"Now, Jimmie, you're always puttin' hits on me. Veal; but if I get veal, it throws me out for good."

John made another effort to wrench the conversation from the topic of food:

"No, no, James. I was going to ask you to come and give me a hand with our nephew. He slightly accentuated the pronoun of possession. "Of course, that is to say, if Beatrice would."

"What do you want her to do? Beatrice?"

"No, no, no, James. I'm not joking. As I said, I've got these two children—er—staying with me. That George is too overstrained, too ill that is,

bees, and it's tremendously popular. Why? Because a bee is well-known. Certainly they sting too, but then they have honey and people keep them. If people kept dragon-flies, it would be different. No, my opinion is that for an eldest son Jimmie has been very unlucky."

The next day Bertram disappeared to school at an hour of the morning which John remembered did exist in his youth, but which he had for long regarded as a portion of the great backward and abysm of time. Beatrice tactfully removed his niece immediately after breakfast, not the auroral breakfast of Bertram, but the comfortable meal of ten o'clock; and except for a rehearsal of a *bolero* in the room over the library John was able to put in a morning of undisturbed diligence. Beatrice took Viola for a walk in the afternoon, and when Bertram arrived back from school about six o'clock she nearly spoilt her own dinner by the assistance she gave him with his tea. John had a couple of quiet hours with *Joan of Arc* before dinner, when he was only once interrupted by Beatrice's coming as her nephew's ambassador to ask what was the past participle of some Latin verb, which cost him five minutes' search for a dictionary. After dinner John played two setts of piquet with his sister-in-law and having won both began to feel that there was a good deal to be said for a woman's presence in the house.

About eleven o'clock on the morning of the next day James arrived, and not only James, but Beyle the bulldog, who had, if one might judge by his behaviour, as profound a contempt as his master for John's library, and a much more unpleasant way of showing it.

"I wish you'd leave your dog in the hall," John protested. "Look at him now; he's upset the paper-basket. Get down off that chair! I say, do look at him!"

Beyle was coursing round the room, steering himself with the kinked blob that served him for a tail.

"He likes the soft carpet," his master explained. "He thinks it's grass."

"What an idiotic dog," John scoffed. "And I suppose he thinks my Aubusson is an herbaceous border. Drop it, you brute, will you. I say, do put him downstairs. He's going to worry it in a minute, and all agree that bulldogs can't be induced

## Poor Relations

to let go of anything they've once fairly gripped. will you ! ”

James roared with laughter at his brother's ; finally he turned the dog out of the room, and John he fancied was a panic-stricken descent of the stairs or . . .

“ I say, I hope he isn't chasing Mrs. Worfolk out of the house,” he ejaculated as he hurried out on . . . Whatever Beyle had been doing, he was at rest now up at John from the front-door mat. “ I hope it's Mrs. Worfolk,” he said coming back. “ She's in a . . . state just at present.”

“ What ? ” James shouted incredulously.

“ Oh, not in that way, my dear fellow, not . . . But she's not used to having so many visitors in . . .

“ I'm going to take one of them away with . . . be any consolation to her,” James announced.

“ Not Beatrice ? ” his brother stammered.

James nodded grimly.

“ It's all very fine for you with a mob of servants after you : but I can't spare Beatrice any more than you could spare Mrs. Worfolk. I've been uncomfortable for nearly two days, and my wife's back.”

“ Oh, but look here,” John protested, “ she's bringing the children magnificently. I've hardly known her in the house. You can't take Beatrice away.”

“ Sorry, Johnnie, but my existence is not so comfortable with comforts as yours. You'd better get a wit that you can afford one.”

“ But can't we arrive at a compromise ? ”

“ Why don't you come and camp out with me,

“ Camp out, you hypocrite ! ” the critic jeered. “ You can't bribe me with your luxuries. Do you think I could work with two children careering all over the house. I daresay they don't disturb your plays. I daresay I hear them above the clash of swords and the rolling of drums, but for critical work I want quiet. I'm . . . afraid I must carry off Beatrice.”



"Well, of course, if you must. . . ." John murmured despondently. And it was very little consolation to think, while Viola practised a *fandango* in the library preparatory to dislocating the household by removing Maud from her work to escort her to the dancing-class, that Beatrice herself would have liked to stay.

"However," John sternly resolved, "the next time that James tries to scoff at married life I shall tell him pretty plainly what I think of his affectation."

He decided ultimately to keep the children at Church Row for a week, to give them some kind of treat on Saturday, and on Saturday evening before dinner to take them back to their father and insist upon his being responsible for them. If by chance George proved to be really ill, which he did not suppose for a moment that he would, he should take matters firmly into his hands and export the children to Ambles until their mother came home: Viola could practise every known variety of Spanish dance over Laurence's head, or even in Laurence's room; and as for Bertram he could corrupt Harold to his heart's content.

On the whole, the week passed off well. Although Viola had fallen like Lucifer from being an angel in Maud's mind, she won back her esteem by behaving like a human little girl when they went to the dancing-class together and did not try to assume diabolic attributes in exchange for the angelic position she had forfeited. John was allowed to gather that Viola's chief claim to Maud's forgiveness was founded upon her encouragement of the advances made to her escort by a handsome young sergeant of the Line whom they had encountered in the tube.

"Miss Viola behaved herself like a little lady," Maud had informed John when they came home.

"You enjoyed taking her?"

"Yes, indeed, sir, it's a pleasure to go about with anyone so ladylike. Several very nice people turned round to admire her."

"Did they, Maud, did they?"

Later, when Viola's account of the afternoon reached him he wondered if the sergeant was one of those nice people.

## Poor Relations

Mrs. Worfolk, too, was reconciled to Bertram ; found respect he accorded to her tales and by his of an album of family photographs she brought from the bottom of her trunk.

"The boy can be as quiet as a mouse," she said "as long as he isn't encouraged to make a hullabaloo."

"You think I encourage him, Mrs. Worfolk?"

"Well, sir, it's not my place to offer an opinion on managing children, but giving them a calf's head and telling them to misbehave themselves. It's asking too much. There he is now, doing what he calls his homework on a plate of toffee I made for him—as good as gold. I do ask is where's the use in filling up a child's head with Greek and Latin and Greece. Teach a child to be a heathen god or heathen goddess he'll be. Teach him the story of the boy Samuel and he'll behave like the Infant Samuel, I say that one child who I told about God's voice to which I was nursemaid had a regular fit and woke up in the middle of the night that he could hear about for him under the bed. But then he was very old-fashioned notions and took the whole story and his mother said after that no one wasn't to read except stories about animals."

"What happened to him when he grew up?"

"Well, sir, I lost sight of the whole family, but he became a clergyman, for he never lost this habit of God was dodging him all the time. It was God himself there till I fairly got the jumps myself and might have done with the Wesleys if I hadn't gone as third house in a family where the master kept race-horses which was something else to think about, and I never had any to do with children until my poor sister's Herbert."

"That must have been a great change, Mrs. Worfolk."

"Yes, sir, so it was ; but life's only one long change, though they do say there's nothing new under the sun. Good gracious me, fellows who make up motters and say they've got to, so as to keep up with one another."

When Friday evening arrived John nearly emphatically refused to accept of Mrs. Worfolk's agreement with Heraclitus by keeping the

"Well, of course, if you must. . . ." John murmured despondently. And it was very little consolation to think, while Viola practised a *sandango* in the library preparatory to dislocating the household by removing Maud from her work to escort her to the dancing-class, that Beatrice herself would have liked to stay.

"However," John sternly resolved, "the next time that James tries to scoff at married life I shall tell him pretty plainly what I think of his affectation."

He decided ultimately to keep the children at Church Row for a week, to give them some kind of treat on Saturday, and on Saturday evening before dinner to take them back to their father and insist upon his being responsible for them. If by chance George proved to be really ill, which he did not suppose for a moment that he would, he should take matters firmly into his hands and export the children to Ambles until their mother came home: Viola could practise every known variety of Spanish dance over Laurence's head, or even in Laurence's room; and as for Bertram he could corrupt Harold to his heart's content.

On the whole, the week passed off well. Although Viola had fallen like Lucifer from being an angel in Maud's mind, she won back her esteem by behaving like a human little girl when they went to the dancing-class together and did not try to assume diabolic attributes in exchange for the angelic position she had forfeited. John was allowed to gather that Viola's chief claim to Maud's forgiveness was founded upon her encouragement of the advances made to her escort by a handsome young sergeant of the Line whom they had encountered in the tube.

"Miss Viola behaved herself like a little lady," Maud had informed John when they came home.

"You enjoyed taking her?"

"Yes, indeed, sir, it's a pleasure to go about with anyone so ladylike. Several very nice people turned round to admire her."

"Did they, Maud, did they?"

Later, when Viola's account of the afternoon reached him he wondered if the sergeant was one of those nice people.

## *Poor Relations*

Mrs. Worfolk, too, was reconciled to Bertram found respect he accorded to her tales and by his of an album of family photographs she brought from the bottom of her trunk.

"The boy can be as quiet as a mouse," she "as long as he isn't encouraged to make a hullabal

"You think I encourage him, Mrs. Worfolk?"

"Well, sir, it's not my place to offer an op managing children, but giving them a calf's head telling them to misbehave themselves. It's asking There he is now, doing what he calls his homework plate of toffee I made for him—as good as gold. do ask is where's the use in filling up a child's head and Greece. Teach a child to be a heathen go heathen goddess he'll be. Teach him the story of Samuel and he'll behave like the Infant Samuel, then say that one child who I told about God's voice in to which I was nursemaid had a regular fit and working in the middle of the night that he could hear about for him under the bed. But then he was very old-fashioned notions and took the whole story and his mother said after that no one wasn't to read except stories about animals."

"What happened to him when he grew up?" John

"Well, sir, I lost sight of the whole family, but became a clergyman, for he never lost this habit God was dodging him all the time. It was God here till I fairly got the jumps myself and might have with the Wesleians if I hadn't gone as third house family where the master kept race-horses which something else to think about, and I never had any to do with children until my poor sister's Herbert."

"That must have been a great change, Mrs. Worfolk."

"Yes, sir, so it was; but life's only one long change, though they do say there's nothing new under the good gracious me, fellows who make up mottoes always ate a bit: they've got to, so as to keep up with one another."

When Friday evening arrived John nearly empty. Worfolk's agreement with Heraclitus by keeping the

"Well, of course, if you must. . . ." John murmured despondently. And it was very little consolation to think, while Viola practised a *sandango* in the library preparatory to dislocating the household by removing Maud from her work to escort her to the dancing-class, that Beatrice herself would have liked to stay.

"However," John sternly resolved, "the next time that James tries to scoff at married life I shall tell him pretty plainly what I think of his affectation."

He decided ultimately to keep the children at Church Row for a week, to give them some kind of treat on Saturday, and on Saturday evening before dinner to take them back to their father and insist upon his being responsible for them. If by chance George proved to be really ill, which he did not suppose for a moment that he would, he should take matters firmly into his hands and export the children to Ambles until their mother came home: Viola could practise every known variety of Spanish dance over Laurence's head, or even in Laurence's room; and as for Bertram he could corrupt Harold to his heart's content.

On the whole, the week passed off well. Although Viola had fallen like Lucifer from being an angel in Maud's mind, she won back her esteem by behaving like a human little girl when they went to the dancing-class together and did not try to assume diabolic attributes in exchange for the angelic position she had forfeited. John was allowed to gather that Viola's chief claim to Maud's forgiveness was founded upon her encouragement of the advances made to her escort by a handsome young sergeant of the Line whom they had encountered in the tube.

"Miss Viola behaved herself like a little lady," Maud had informed John when they came home.

"You enjoyed taking her?"

"Yes, indeed, sir, it's a pleasure to go about with anyone so ladylike. Several very nice people turned round to admire her."

"Did they, Maud, did they?"

Later, when Viola's account of the afternoon reached him he wondered if the sergeant was one of those nice people.

## *Poor Relations*

Mrs. Worfolk, too, was reconciled to Bertram by found respect he accorded to her tales and by his ap of an album of family photographs she brought o from the bottom of her trunk.

"The boy can be as quiet as a mouse," she ass  
"as long as he isn't encouraged to make a hulla."

"You think I encourage him, Mrs. Worfolk?"

"Well, sir, it's not my place to offer an op managing children, but giving them a calf's head telling them to misbehave theirselves. It's askin There he is now, doing what he calls his homewo, plate of toffee I made for him—as good as gold do ask is where's the use in filling up a child's h and Greece. Teach a child to be a heathen heathen goddess he'll be. Teach him the stor Samuel and he'll behave like the Infant Samuel say that one child who I told about God's voi to which I was nursemaid had a regular fit and ing in the middle of the night that he could b about for him under the bed. But then he very old-fashioned notions and took the whole and his mother said after that no one wasn't to except stories about animals."

"What happened to him when he grew up

at Church Row. But by the last post there came a letter from Janet Bond to beg an earlier production of *Joan of Arc* if it was by any means possible, and John looking at the infinitesimal amount he had written during the week resolved that he must stick to his intention of taking the children back to their father on the following day.

"What would you like to do to-morrow?" he enquired. "I happen to have a free afternoon, and—er—I'm afraid your father wants you back in Earl's Court, so it will be your last opportunity of enjoying yourselves for some time—I mean of our enjoying ourselves for some time, in fact until we all meet at Ambles for Christmas."

"Oh, I say," Bertram protested. "Have we got to go back to rotten old Earl's Court? What a sell!"

"I thought we were going to live here always," Viola exclaimed.

"But don't you want to go back to your father?" John demanded in what he hoped was a voice brimming with reproaches for their lack of filial piety, but which he could not help feeling was bubbling over with something very near elation.

"Oh no," both children affirmed, "we like being with you much best."

John's gratification was suddenly darkened by the suspicion that perhaps Eleanor had told them to flatter him like this; he turned swiftly aside to hide the chagrin that such a thought gave him, and when he spoke again it was almost roughly, because in addition to being suspicious of their sincerity he was vexed with himself for displaying a spirit of competitive affection. It occurred to him that it was jealousy rather than love which made the world go round—a dangerous reflection for a romantic playwright.

"I'm afraid it can't be helped," he said. "To-morrow is definitely our last day. So choose your own method of celebrating it without dressing up."

"Oh, we only dress up on Sundays," Viola said loftily.

"I vote we go to the Zoo," Bertram opinionated after a weighty pause.

Had his nephew Harold suggested a visit to the Zoo, John





ments. It's just as well you're going again to-morrow. You'll be able to explain that it wasn't your fault."

"No, it wasn't," said Bertram bitterly. "It was Miss Coldwell's."

"Yes," said Viola. "She simply tore past everything. And when Bertram gave the chimpanzee a brown marble instead of a nut and he nearly broke one of his teeth, she said it was cruel."

"Yes, fancy thinking *that* was cruel," Bertram scoffed. "He was in an awful wax, though; he bunged it back at me like anything. But I swopped the marble on Monday with Higginbotham Minor for two green commonys: at least I said it was the marble; only really I dropped it while we were waiting for the bus."

"You're a kind of juvenile Lord Elgin," John declared.

"What did he do?"

"He did the Greek nation over marbles, just as you did the chimpanzee and Higginbotham Minor."

Next morning John made arrangements to send the children's luggage to Earl's Court so that he should be able when the Zoological Gardens were closed to take them directly home and

## Poor Relations

were several welcome surprises such as seeing much the hippopotamus than the tips of his nostrils floating bits of mud on the surface of the water; others including alleged visibility of a beaver's tail, a conjugal scene between polar-bears, a truly demoniac exhibition of rage by a manian-devil, some wonderful gymnastics by a bab leopard, a successful attempt to touch a kangaroo's indisputable wriggle of vitality from the anaconda, sudden scratching of its ear by a somnolent fruit-eater.

About ten minutes before the Gardens closed John, tired out and had somehow got his cigar-case full of declared it was time to go home.

"Oh, but we must just have a squint at the Small House," Bertram cried, and Viola clasped her hands in apprehension at the bare idea of not doing so.

"All right," John agreed. "I'll wait for you three and then I'm going slowly along towards the exit."

The three minutes passed, and since the children still he walked on as he had promised. When they did pick him up as soon as he expected, he waited for a while with an exclamation of annoyance turned back.

"What on earth can they find to enjoy in this and he wondered, when he entered the Small Cats' House to find them out. The house was empty except for a boy thinking of his tea.

"Have you seen two children?" John asked a keeper.

"No, sir, this is the Small Cats' House," replied the keeper.

"Children," repeated John irritably.

"No, sir. Or yes, I believe there *was* a little boy and girl in here, but they've been gone some minutes since closing-time," he added significantly.

John rushed miserably along deserted paths at dusk, looking everywhere for Bertram and Viola without success.

"All out," was being shouted from every direction.

"Two children," he panted to a keeper by the exit.

"All out."

"But two children are lost in the Gardens."

"Closing time, sir. They must have gone out by another gate."

He herded John through the turnstile into the street as he would have herded a recalcitrant gnu into its enclosure.

"But this is terrible," John lamented. "This is appalling. I've lost George's children."

He hailed a taxi, drove to the nearest police-station, left their descriptions, and directed the driver to Halma House, Earl's Court Square.

## Chapter Seven

JOHN came to the conclusion while Earl's Court that the distinctive and children was to be sought for in an account of their mobility. He had often enough looked at sovereigns and matchboxes and income-tax stamps, the disappearance of these he had always known, and knowledge that they were stationary in some place at any given moment, and that somebody would find them at some time or another with payment to himself. But Bertram and Viola might if at this moment they were somewhere, but if they turned the next corner they might be somewhere else. The only kind of loss comparable to this was the loss of a dog, in which case also the victim was dismayed by its mobility. Moreover, was it logically possible to find children, any more than it was possible to find a dog? They could be caught like a train by some one, except among gipsies, who were practically impossible to catch. The art of catching children was nowadays unknown. An instance of two lost children—and by the way, the story went into that—was *The Babes in the Wood*, in which the children were neither caught nor found, though certainly they were found owing to the eccentric behaviour of the children in the vicinity. It would be distressing to find the bodies to-morrow of two children's having been found in the pockets of paper-bags in the bear-pit at the Zoo, hugged and killed by each other, but by the bears. Or they might be found themselves in the Reptile House—Bertram had a dreadful curiosity about the effect of standing in the water of the alligators—and their fate might remain for ever a matter of conjecture. Yet even supposing that they were found at the moment regarding with amazed absorption—a word which was too ominous a word—with amazed interest the fate of the gambols of the great cats, were they on that account considered safe? If it was a question of being

"Closing time, sir. They must have gone out by another gate."

He herded John through the turnstile into the street as he would have herded a recalcitrant gnu into its enclosure.

"But this is terrible," John lamented. "This is appalling. I've lost George's children."

He hailed a taxi, drove to the nearest police-station, left their descriptions, and directed the driver to Halma House, Earl's Court Square.

JOHN came to the conclusion while he was in Earl's Court that the distinctive anxiety in children was to be sought for in an acute consciousness of their mobility. He had often enough lost such sovereigns and matchboxes and income-tax demands; the disappearance of these he had always been conscious of, in knowledge that they were stationary in some place at any given moment, and that somebody or another would find them at some time or another with profit or detriment to himself. But Bertram and Viola might be lost; if at this moment they were somewhere, before they had turned the next corner they might be somewhere else; the only kind of loss comparable to this was the loss of a child, in which case also the victim was dismayed by the thought of his mobility. Moreover, was it logically possible to find children, any more than it was possible to find a train? They could be caught like a train by somebody except among gipsies, who were practically extinct; the art of catching children was nowadays unknown. He remembered an instance of two lost children—and by the way an instance of two found—into that—was *The Babes in the Wood*, in which the children were neither caught nor found, though certainly they were found owing to the eccentric behaviour of some people in the vicinity. It would be distressing to read in the newspaper to-morrow of two children's having been found under a pile of paper-bags in the bear-pit at the Zoo, hugged together by each other, but by the bears. Or they might be found in themselves in the Reptile House—Bertram had a dreadful curiosity about the effect of standing near the alligators—and their fate might remain for ever a matter of conjecture. Yet even supposing that they were found at the moment regarding with amazed absorption—absorption was too ominous a word—with amazed interest the children, the gambols of the great cats, were they on that account considered safe? If it was a question of being

it made little difference whether one was crunched up by the wheels of an omnibus or by the jaws of a panther. To be sure, Bertram was accustomed to go to school by tube every morning, and obviously he must know by this time how to ask the way to any given spot. . . .

The driver of the taxi was taking no risks with the traffic, and John's tightly strung nerves were relaxed; he began to perceive that he was agitating himself foolishly. The wide smoothness of Cromwell Road was all that was needed to persuade him that the shock had deprived him for a short time of common-sense. How absurd he had been! Of course the children would be all right; but he should take good care to administer no less sharp a shock to George than he had experienced himself. He did not approve of George's attitude, and if the temporary loss of Bertram and Viola could rouse him to a sense of his paternal responsibilities, this disturbing climax of a jolly day would not have been led up to in vain. No, George's moral, mental, and physical laziness must no longer be encouraged.

"I shall make the whole business out to be as bad as possible," he decided. "Though, now that I have had time to think the situation out, I realize that there is really not the least likelihood of anything's serious having happened to them."

For James even when he was most exasperating John always felt an involuntary deference that stood quite apart from the sentimental regard which he tried to owe him as head of the family; for his second brother George he felt nothing except contempt. James might be wrongheaded; but George was fatheaded. James kept something of their father's fallen day about him; George was a kind of gross caricature of his own self. Every feature in this brother's face reproduced the corresponding feature in his own with such compelling suggestiveness of a potentially similar degeneration that John could never escape from the reproach of George's insistent kinship. Many times he had been seized by a strong impulse to cut George ruthlessly out of his life; but as soon as he perceived that gibbous development of his own aquiline nose, that reduplication of his own rounded chin, that bull-like

## *Poor Relations*

thickening of his own sanguine neck, and that situation of the eloquent pouches beneath his own surrendered to the claims of fraternity and lent much as he required at the moment. If Daniel C to marry Hilda had always puzzled him, Eleanor's to be tied for life to George was even more incoherent. Still, it was lucky that she had been taken with such because she was all that stood between George and dependence upon his family, in other words upon his brother. Whatever Eleanor's faults, however agreeable personality, John recognized that she was a hard taskmaster that the incubus of a husband like George (to whom he seemed curiously and inexplicably devoted) entitled to a great deal of indulgence.

It was strange to look back now to the time when George were both in the city, himself in dog-his George in wool, and to remember that except for everybody in the family had foretold a prosperous career for George. Beyond his skill at solo whist and combination of luck with judgment in betting through August on weight for age selling-plates and avoiding autumn handicaps, John could not recall that George shown a glimmer of financial intelligence. Once when he had visited his brother in the wool-warehouse watched an interview between George and a bale of he had often chuckled at the reflection that the pair were well matched—there had always been something about George in mind and body; and when one day stolidly forth from the warehouse for the last time to enter into partnership with a deluded friend to act as British agents for a society of colonial housewives, that the deluded friend would have been equally well served by a bale of wool. When George and his deluded friend tried the patience of the colonial housewives for never once succeeding in procuring for them what was required, the partnership was dissolved, and George from undertaking to undertaking till he became the manager of a theatrical touring company. Although business manager he reached the nadir of his incom-



merged from the post with Eleanor for wife, which perhaps gave rise to a family legend that George had never been so successful as when he was a business manager. This legend he never dispelled by a second exhibition of himself in the part, although he often spoke regretfully of the long Sundays in the train, playing nap for penny points. After he married Eleanor he was commission-agent for a variety of gentlemanly commodities like whisky and cigars; but he drank and smoked much more than he sold, and when bridge was introduced and popularized, having decided that it was the best investment for his share of Eleanor's salary, he abandoned everything else. Moreover, John's increasing prosperity gave his play a fine stability and confidence; he used to feel that his wife's current account merely lapped the base of a solid cliff of capital. A bad week at bridge came to be known as another financial disappointment; but he used to say cheerfully when he signed the I.O.U. that one must not expect everybody in the family to be always lucky, and that it was dear old John's turn this week. John himself sometimes became quite giddy with watching the swift revolutions of the wheel of fortune as spun by George. The effect of sitting up late at cards usually made George wake with a headache, which he called 'feeling overworked'; he was at his best in the dusky hours before dinner, in fact just at the time when John was on his way to explode in his car the news of the children's disappearance; it was then that among the attenuated spinsters of Halma House his grossness seemed nothing more than a ruddy well-being and that his utter indifference to any kind of responsibility acquired the characteristics of a ripe geniality.

Halma House, Earl's Court Square, was a very large boarding-house, so large that Miss Moxley, the most attenuated spinster who lived in it, once declared that it was more like a residential hotel than a boarding-house, a theory that was eagerly supported by all the other attenuated spinsters who clung to its overstuffed furniture or like dusty cobwebs floated about its garish saloons. Halma House was indeed two houses squeezed or knocked (or whatever other uncomfortable verb can be found to express the welding) into one. Above the front-door of Number 198 were the large gilt letters that



of that sitting-room. John on the other hand disliked it and took pleasure in pointing out the impossibility of knowing whether it was a conservatory half transformed into a box-room or a box-room nearly turned into a conservatory. He used to call it George's amphibious apartment, with justice indeed, for Bertram and Viola with true appreciation had once selected it as the appropriate setting in which to reproduce Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. The wallpaper of dark blue flock was smeared with the glistening pattern like seaweed upon rocks at low tide; the window was of ground-glass tinted to the hue of the water in a swimming-bath on Saturday afternoon, and was surrounded by an elaborate arrangement of cork that masked a number of flower pots filled with unexacting plants; while as if the atmosphere was not already sufficiently aqueous, a stage of disheartened aspidistras cast a deep-sea twilight upon the recesses of the room, in the middle of which was a jagged table of particoloured marble, and upon the walls of which were hung cases of stuffed fish. Mrs. Easton, the proprietress of Halma House, only lent the room to George as a favour: it was not really his own, and while he lay in bed of a morning she used to quarrel there with all the servants in turn. Moreover, any of the boarders who had bicycles stabled them in this advantageous apartment, the fireplace of which smoked. Nevertheless, George liked it and used to knit there for an hour after lunch, sitting in an armchair that smelt like the cushions of a third-class smoker and looking with his knitting needles and opaque eyes like a large lobster preening his antennæ in the corner of a tank.

When John visited him now, he was reading an evening paper by the light of a ragged mantle of incandescent gas and calculating how much he would have won if he had backed the second favourite for every steeplechase of the day.

"Hullo, is that you, John?" he enquired with a yawn, and one hand swam vaguely in his brother's direction while the other kept its fingers spread out upon the second favourites like a stranded starfish.

"Yes, I'm afraid I've got very bad news for you, George."

## Poor Relations

George's opaque eyes rolled slowly away from the fixed his brother's in dull interrogation.

"Bertram and Viola are lost," John proclaimed.

"Oh, that's all right," George sighed with a thought you were serious for a minute. Crested to I—yes, my theory that you ought to back second works out right for the ninth time in succession. have been six pounds up to-day, betting with level Tut-tut-tut!"

John felt that his announcement had not made splash it ought to have made in George's deep pool.

"I don't think you heard what I said," he said. "Bertram and Viola—*your* children—are definitely

"I don't expect they are really," said George. "No, no, not really. The trouble is that no bookie will take on this second-favourite system. I daren't, the cowards! Don't you bother about that, no, they'll be all right. They're probably hanging in a van—they often do that when I'm out with the always turn up in the end. Yes, I should have nine pounds this week."

"Look here," said John severely, "I want you to understand that this is not a simple question of for a few minutes or so. They have been lost. The Zoo was closed this afternoon, and I am not sure that they are not shut up inside for the night."

"Ah, very likely," said George. "That's the place they might get to."

"The prospect of your children's passing the Zoo leaves you unaffected?" John demanded in an examining counsel.

"Oh, they'll have been cleared out by now," he said. "You really mustn't bother yourself about the boy."

"You have no qualms, George, at the notion of wandering for hours upon the outskirts of Regent

"Now don't you worry, John. They won't go, and I don't want you to worry. V"

it, you'll find them safe and sound in Church Row when you get back. By the way, is your taxi waiting?"

"No, I dismissed it." *change person with of waiting*

"I was afraid it might be piling up the twopences. Though I daresay a pyramid of twopences wouldn't bother you, you old plutocrat. Yes, these second favourites . . ."

"Confound the second favourites," John exclaimed. "I want to discuss your children."

"You wouldn't, if you were their father. They involve me in far too many discussions. You see; you're not used to children. I am."

John's eyes flashed as much as the melancholy illumination permitted; this was the cue for which he had been waiting.

"Just so, my dear George. You are used to children: I am not. And that is why I have come to tell you that the police have been instructed to return them, when found, to you and not to me."

George blinked in a puzzled way.

"To me?" he echoed.

"Yes, to you. To their father. Hasn't their luggage arrived? I had it sent back here this morning."

"Ah, yes," George said. "Of course! I was rather late getting up this morning. I've been overworking a bit lately, and Karl did mutter something about luggage. Didn't it come in a taxi?"

John nodded.

"Yes, I remember now, in a prepaid taxi; but as I couldn't remember that I was expecting any luggage, I told Karl to send it back where it came from."

"Do you mean to say that you sent their luggage back after I'd taken the trouble to . . ."

"That's all right, old boy. I was feeling too tired to deal with any problems this morning. The morning is the only opportunity I get for a little peace. It never occurred to me whose luggage it was. It might have been a mistake; in fact I thought it was a mistake. But in any case it's very lucky I did send it back, because they'll want it to-night."

"I'm afraid I can't keep them with me any longer."

Though irony might be lost on George's cold blood, the



it, you'll find them safe and sound in Church Row when you get back. By the way, is your taxi waiting?"

"No, I dismissed it."

"I was afraid it might be piling up the twopences. Though I daresay a pyramid of twopences wouldn't bother you, you old plutocrat. Yes, these second favourites . . ."

"Confound the second favourites," John exclaimed. "I want to discuss your children."

"You wouldn't, if you were their father. They involve me in far too many discussions. You see, you're not used to children. I am."

John's eyes flashed as much as the melancholy illumination permitted; this was the cue for which he had been waiting.

"Just so, my dear George. You are used to children: I am not. And that is why I have come to tell you that the police have been instructed to return them, when found, to you and not to me."

George blinked in a puzzled way.

"To me?" he echoed.

"Yes, to you. To their father. Hasn't their luggage arrived? I had it sent back here this morning."

"Ah, yes," George said. "Of course! I was rather late getting up this morning. I've been overworking a bit lately, and Karl did mutter something about luggage. Didn't it come in a taxi?"

John nodded.

"Yes, I remember now, in a prepaid taxi; but as I couldn't remember that I was expecting any luggage, I told Karl to send it back where it came from."

"Do you mean to say that you sent their luggage back after I'd taken the trouble to . . ."

"That's all right, old boy. I was feeling too tired to deal with any problems this morning. The morning is the only opportunity I get for a little peace. It never occurred to me whose luggage it was. It might have been a mistake; in fact I thought it was a mistake. But in any case it's very lucky I did send it back, because they'll want it to-night."

"I'm afraid I can't keep them with me any longer."

Though irony might be lost on George's cold blood.

## Poor Relations

plain fact might wake him up to the actuality of the and so it did.

"Oh, but look here, old boy," he expostulated, "won't be home for another five weeks. She'll be next week."

"And Bertram and Viola will be at Earl's Court, firmly.

"But the doctor strongly recommended me to be very seedy while you were in America. Steady boy. Yes, that's the trouble. And then my nerves strong as yours. I've had a lot of worry lately."

"I'm sorry," John insisted. "But I've been on urgent business, and I can't leave the children Row. I'm sorry, George, but as soon as they must hand them over to you."

"I shall send them down to the country," George

"When they are once more safely in your keeping do what you like with them."

"To your place, I mean."

Normally John would have given a ready assent to the proposal; but George's attitude had by now a bitter disapproval, and he was determined that P. and Viola should be planted upon their father without

"Ambles is impossible," he said decidedly. "Eleanor is anxious that Viola shouldn't miss her Spanish dances. She attends the dancing-class every evening and Friday. No doubt your landlady will lend you an escort her."

"Children are very difficult in a boarding-house," John argued. "They're apt to disturb the other guests. There was a little trouble only last week over some

"Robinson Crusoe," John put in.

"Ah, they told you?"

"No, no, go on. I'm curious to know exactly what was missed at Church Row."

"Well, they have a habit, which Eleanor most heartily encourages, of dressing up on Sundays, and as I've heard it an understood thing that *none* of my clothes are to be used, they are apt to borrow other people's dresses."



it, you'll find them safe and sound in Church Row when you get back. By the way, is your taxi waiting?"

"No, I dismissed it." *change personae of the role.*

"I was afraid it might be piling up the twopences. Though I daresay a pyramid of twopences wouldn't bother you, you old plutocrat. Yes, these second favourites . . ."

"Confound the second favourites," John exclaimed. "I want to discuss your children."

"You wouldn't, if you were their father. They involve me in far too many discussions. You see, you're not used to children. I am."

John's eyes flashed as much as the melancholy illumination permitted; this was the cue for which he had been waiting.

"Just so, my dear George. You are used to children: I am not. And that is why I have come to tell you that the police have been instructed to return them, when found, to you and not to me."

George blinked in a puzzled way.

"To me?" he echoed.

"Yes, to you. To their father. Hasn't their luggage arrived? I had it sent back here this morning."

"Ah, yes," George said. "Of course! I was rather late getting up this morning. I've been overworking a bit lately, and Karl did mutter something about luggage. Didn't it come in a taxi?"

John nodded.

"Yes, I remember now, in a prepaid taxi; but as I couldn't remember that I was expecting any luggage, I told Karl to send it back where it came from."

"Do you mean to say that you sent their luggage back after I'd taken the trouble to . . ."

"That's all right, old boy. I was feeling too tired to deal with any problems this morning. The morning is the only opportunity I get for a little peace. It never occurred to me whose luggage it was. It might have been a mistake; in fact I thought it was a mistake. But in any case it's very lucky I did send it back, because they'll want it to-night."

"I'm afraid I can't keep them with me any longer."

Though irony might be lost on George's cold blood, the



generally people have been very kind about lending their clothes ; but latterly this dressing up has taken a more ambitious form, and on Sunday week—I think it was——”

“ Yes, it would have been a Sunday,” John agreed.

“ On Sunday week they borrowed Miss Moxley’s parrot for Robinson Crusoe. You remember poor Miss Moxley, John ? ”

“ Yes, she lent you five pounds once,” said John sternly.

“ Precisely. Oh yes, she did. Yes, yes, that was why I was so vexed about her lending her parrot.”

“ Why shouldn’t she lend her parrot ? ”

“ No reason at all why she shouldn’t lend it ; but apparently parrots are very excitable birds, and this particular one went mad under the strain of the children’s performance, bit Major Downman’s finger, and escaped by an upper window. Poor Miss Moxley was extremely upset, and the bird has never been seen since. So you see, as I told you, children are apt to be rather a nuisance to the other guests.”

“ None of the guests at Halma House keeps a tame calf ? ”

George looked frightened.

“ Oh no, I don’t think so. There’s certainly never been the least sign of mooing in the garden. Besides, I’m sure Mrs. Easton would object to a calf. She even objects to dogs, as I had to tell James the other day when he came to see me *very* early about signing some deed or other. But what made you ask about a calf ? Do you want one ? ”

“ No, I don’t want one : I hate cows and calves. Bertram and Viola, however, are likely to want one next week.”

“ You’ve been spoiling them old chap. They’d never dare ask me for a calf. Why, it’s preposterous ! Yes, you’ve been spoiling them. Ah well, you can afford it ; that’s one thing.”

“ Yes, I daresay I have been spoiling them, George ; but you’ll be able to correct that when they’re once again in your sole charge.”

George looked doubtful.

“ I’m very strict with them,” he admitted. “ I had to be after they lost the parrot and burned Mrs. Easton’s rug. It was most annoying.”

“ Yes, luckily I hadn’t got any suitable fur rugs,” John chuckled. “ So they actually burnt Mrs. Easton’s ? ”



"Jew ring?" it asked hoarsely.

"Please ask Mrs. Easton to come down to Mr. Touchwood's sitting-room," said John seriously.

The head sniffed and vanished.

"I wish you could realize, old chap, that in a boarding-house far more tact is required than anywhere else in the world," George muttered in melancholy apprehension. "An embassy isn't in it with a boarding-house. For instance, if I hadn't got the most marvellous tact, I should never have kept this room. However," he added more cheerfully, "I don't suppose for a moment that she'll come—unless of course she thinks that the chimney is on fire. Dash it, John, I wish you could understand some of the difficulties of my life. That's why I took up knitting. My nerves are all to pieces. If I were a rich man I should go for a long sea-voyage."

George fell into a silent brooding upon his misfortunes and ill-health and frustrated ambitions; John examined the stuffed fish upon the walls, which made him think of wet days upon the river and waiting drearily in hotel smoking-rooms for the weather to clear up. Then suddenly Mrs. Easton filled the room. Positive details of this lady's past were lacking, although the gossip of a long line of attenuated spinsters had evolved a rich apocrypha. It was generally accepted, however, that Halma House was founded partly upon settlements made in her favour long ago by a generous stockbroker and partly upon an insurance-policy taken out by her late husband Dr. Easton, almost on the vigil of his death, the only successful operation he ever performed. The mixed derivation of her prosperity was significantly set forth in her personal appearance: she either wore widow's black and powdered her face with pink talcum or she wore bright satins with plumed hats and let her nose shine: so that although she never looked perfectly respectable, on the other hand she never looked really fast.

"Good evening, ma'am," John began at once, assuming an air of Grandisonian courtesy. "My brother is anxious to settle his account."

The clouds rolled away from Mrs. Easton's brow; the old Eve glimmered for a moment in her fierce eye; if he had been



"We shall all hope to see you at half-past seven," she paused in the doorway to assure John.

"You know, I'll tell you what it is, old chap," said George when they were alone again. "You ought to have taken up the commission business and I ought to have written plays. But thanks very much for tiding me over this difficult time."

"Yes," said John a little sharply. "Your wife's current account wasn't flowing quite strongly enough, was it?"

"Wonderful woman, Mrs. Easton," George declared. "She has a keen eye for business."

"And for pleasure too, I should imagine," said John austere. "But get on your coat, George," he added, "because we must go out and enquire at all the police-stations in turn for news of Bertram and Viola. We can't stop here discussing that woman."

"I tell you the kids will be all right. You mustn't get fussy, John. It's absurd to go out now," George protested. "In fact, I daren't. I must think of my health. Dr. Burnham who's staying here for a congress of medical men has given me a lot of advice, and as he has refused to charge me a penny for it, the least I can do is to pay attention to what he says. Besides, what are we going to do?"

"Visit all the police-stations in London."

"What shall we gain by doing that? Have you ever been to a police-station? They're most uncomfortable places to hang about in before dinner."

"Get on your coat," John repeated.

George sighed.

"Well, if you insist, I suppose you have the right to insist; but in my opinion it's a waste of time. And if the kids are in a police-station I think it would teach them a dashed good lesson to keep them there for awhile. You don't want to encourage them to lose themselves every day. I wish you had half-a-dozen kids."

John, however, was inflexible; the sight of his brother sitting in that aqueous room and pondering the might-have-beens of the race-course had kindled in his breast the fire of a reformer; George must be taught that he could not bring





John wished that George would be quick with his coat.

"But I don't go in much for the theatre nowadays."

"Don't you?"

"No, though I used to when I was a subaltern. By gad, yes! But it was better, I think, in my young days. No offence to you, Mr. Touchwood."

"Distance does lend enchantment," John assented.

"Quite, quite. I suppose you don't remember a piece at the old Prince of Wales? What was it called? Upon my soul, I've forgotten. It was a capital piece, though. I remember there was a scene in which the uncle—or it may not have been the uncle—no, I'm wrong, it was at the Strand. Or was it? God bless my soul, I don't know which it was. You don't remember the piece? It was either at the Prince of Wales or the Strand, or by Jove, was it Toole's?"

Was George never coming? Every moment would bring Major Downman nearer to the heart of his reminiscence, and unless he escaped soon he might have to submit to a narrative of the whole plot.

"Do you know what I'm doing?" the Major began again. "I'm confusing two pieces. That's what I'm doing. But I know an uncle arrived suddenly."

"Yes, uncles are often rather fidgety," John agreed. "Ah, excuse me, Major. I see my brother coming downstairs. Good-bye, Major, good-bye. I should like to have a chat with you one of these days about the mid-Victorian theatre."

"Delighted," the Major said fervently. "I shall think of that play before to-night. Don't you be afraid. Yes, it's on the tip of my tongue. On the very tip. But I'm confusing two theatres. I see where I've gone wrong."

At that moment there was the sound of a taxi's arrival at Halma House; the bell rang; when George opened the door for John and himself to pass out, they were met by Mrs. Worfolk holding Viola and Bertram tightly, one in each hand.

"I told you they'd turn up," George said, and immediately took off his overcoat with a sigh of relief. "Well, you've given us a nice hunt," he went on with an indignant scowl at the children. "Come along to my room and explain where you've been. Good evening, Mrs. Worfolk."



pickpockets and then went careering out of the Zoo in the opposite direction. The first taxi that came along they caught hold of and drove back to Church Row. 'But your uncle intended for you to go back to your father, Mr. George, in Earl's Court,' I remarked very severely. 'We know,' they says to me laughing like two hyenas. 'But we don't want to go back to Earl's Court,' putting in a great deal of rudeness about Earl's Court which not wanting to get them into worse trouble than what they will get into as it is I won't repeat. 'And we won't go back to Earl's Court,' they said, 'what's more. We *won't* go back.' Well, sir, when I've had my orders given me, I know where I am, and the policeman at the corner being a friend of Elsa's, he helped; for, believe me or not, they struggled like two convicts with Maud and I. Well, to cut a long story short, here they are, and just about fit to be put to bed on the instant."

John could not fancy that Eleanor had contrived such an elaborate display of preference for his company, and with every wish to support Mrs. Worfolk by an exhibition of avuncular sternness he could only smile at his nephew and niece. Indeed, it cost him a great effort not to take them back with him at once to Hampstead. He hardened himself, however, and tried to look shocked.

"We wanted to stay with you," said Bertram.

"We wanted to stay with you," echoed Viola.

"We didn't *want* to dodge you in the Small Cats' House. But we had to," said Bertram.

"Yes, we had to," echoed Viola.

"Their luggage *'as* come back with them," interrupted Mrs. Worfolk grimly.

"Oh, of course they must stay here," John agreed. "Oh, unquestionably! I wasn't thinking of anything else."

He beckoned to Bertram and Viola to follow him out of the room.

"Look here," he whispered to them in the passage, "be good children and stay quietly at home. We shall meet at Christmas." He pressed a sovereign into each hand.

"Good lummy," Bertram gasped. "I wish I'd had this on the fifth of November. I'd have made old Major Downman



pickpockets and then went careering out of the Zoo in the opposite direction. The first taxi that came along they caught hold of and drove back to Church Row. 'But your uncle intended for you to go back to your father, Mr. George, in Earl's Court,' I remarked very severely. 'We know,' they says to me laughing like two hyenas. 'But we don't want to go back to Earl's Court,' putting in a great deal of rudeness about Earl's Court which not wanting to get them into worse trouble than what they will get into as it is I won't repeat. 'And we won't go back to Earl's Court,' they said, 'what's more. We *won't* go back.' Well, sir, when I've had my orders given me, I know where I am, and the policeman at the corner being a friend of Elsa's, he helped; for, believe me or not, they struggled like two convicts with Maud and I. Well, to cut a long story short, here they are, and just about fit to be put to bed on the instant."

John could not fancy that Eleanor had contrived such an elaborate display of preference for his company, and with every wish to support Mrs. Worfolk by an exhibition of avuncular sternness he could only smile at his nephew and niece. Indeed, it cost him a great effort not to take them back with him at once to Hampstead. He hardened himself, however, and tried to look shocked.

"We wanted to stay with you," said Bertram.

"We wanted to stay with you," echoed Viola.

"We didn't *want* to dodge you in the Small Cats' House. But we had to," said Bertram.

"Yes, we had to," echoed Viola.

"Their luggage *'as* come back with them," interrupted Mrs. Worfolk grimly.

"Oh, of course they must stay here," John agreed. "Oh, unquestionably! I wasn't thinking of anything else."

He beckoned to Bertram and Viola to follow him out of the room.

"Look here," he whispered to them in the passage, "be good children and stay quietly at home. We shall meet at Christmas." He pressed a sovereign into each hand.

"Good lummy," Bertram gasped. "I wish I'd had this on the fifth of November. I'd have made old Major Downman

## *Poor Relations*

much more waxy than he was when I tied a sq coat."

"Did you, Bertram, did you? You oughtn't to that. Though I can understand the temptation. waste this on fireworks."

"Oh, no," said Bertram. "I'm going to buy a parrot, because we lost hers."

"Are you, Bertram?" John exclaimed with some. "That shows a fine spirit, my boy. I'm very pl you."

"Yes," said Bertram, "because then with what y we'll buy a monkey at the same time."

"Good heavens," cried John turning pale. "A

"That will be nice, won't it, Uncle John?" V tenderly.

But perhaps it would escape from an upper win parrot, John thought, before Christmas.

When the children had been sent upstairs and M. had gone back to Hampstead, John told his broth should not stop to dinner after all.

"Oh, all right," George said. "But I had s talk over with you. Those confounded children p out of my mind. I had a strange letter from Mama. It seems that Hugh has got into rather a nasty doesn't say what it is, and I don't know why she wro all people. But she's evidently frightened about asks me to approach you on his behalf."

"What on earth has he been doing now?" gloomily.

"I should think it was probably money," s "Well, I told you I'd had a lot of worry lately, been very worried about this news of Hugh. V I'm afraid it may be serious this time. But if I w chap, I should refuse to do anything about it. v he come to you to get him out of a scrape? Y enough for him in my opinion. You mustn't let advantage of your good nature, even if they a I'm sorry my kids have been a bit of a nuisance, they are still only kids, and Hugh isn't. He's l

know better. Mama says something about the police, but that may only be Hugh's bluff. I shouldn't worry myself if I were you. It's no good for us all to worry."

"I shall go and see Hugh at once," John decided. "You're not keeping anything from me, George? He's not actually under arrest?"

"Oh no, you won't have to visit any more police-stations to-night," George promised. "Hugh is living with his friend Aubrey Fenton at 22 Carlington Road, West Kensington."

"I shall go there to-night," John declared.

He had almost reached the front-door when George called him back.

"I've been trying to work out a riddle," he said earnestly. "You know there's a medicine called Easton's Syrup? Well, I thought . . . don't be in such a hurry, you'll muddle me up . . . and I shall spoil it. . . ."

"Try it on Major Downman," John advised crossly, slamming the door of Halma House behind him. "Fatuous, that's what George is, utterly fatuous," he assured himself as he hurried down the steps.

## Chapter Eight

JOHN decided to walk from Earl's Court to Weston; being still in complete ignorance of what was done, he had a presentiment that this time it was a thing really grave, and he was now beginning to believe George knew how grave it was. Perhaps his decision to go on foot was not altogether wise, for he was tired out by a long day, and he had never experienced before such a senseless sinking of the stomach on the verge of being involved in a disagreeable family complication, which was prolonged by the opportunity that the walk afforded him for dismal reflection. While he hurried with bowed head along one ill-lit street after another a temptation assailed him to follow George's advice and abandon Hugh, and not merely Hugh, but the rest of his relations, a temptation that elaborated the idea of going back to Church Row, packing up, and escaping to the Colonies or British East Africa or Samoa. In the first place, he had already several times vowed never more to have anything to do with his youngest brother; secondly, he was justified in following strongly the tortuous road by which he had been led to this on his behalf; thirdly, it might benefit Hugh's moral condition for a week or two in fear of the ubiquitous police instead of stay-at-home tradesmen; fourthly, if anything happened to Hugh, it would serve as a warning to the others, particularly to George; finally, it was half-past four, and if he waited to eat his dinner before tackling Hugh, he should undoubtedly tackle him afterward in a more generous a frame of mind. Yes, it would be wiser to go now, at once, have a good dinner, and start for Arizona tomorrow morning. The longer he contemplated it, the less likely was he to go. He had been beguiled into visiting Hugh. If he was a young bounder—no, really bounder was not too strong a word—if the young bounder was in trouble, why could he not come forward openly and courageously to the one person who could help him? Why had he again relied



mother's fondness and why had she, as always, chosen the indirect channel by writing to George rather than to himself? The fact of the matter was that his mother and George and Hugh possessed similar loose conceptions of integrity, and now that it was become a question of facing the music they had instinctively joined hands. Yet George had advised him to have nothing more to do with Hugh, which looked as if his latest game was a bit too strong even for George to relish, for John declined to believe that George possessed enough of the spirit of competitive sponging to bother about trying to poach in Hugh's waters; Hilda or Eleanor might, but George. . . George was frightened, that was it; obviously he knew more than he had told, and he did not want to be exposed. . . it would not astonish him to learn that George was in the business with Hugh and had invented that letter from Mama to invoke his intervention before it was too late to save himself. What could it all be about? Curiosity turned the scale against Arizona, and John pressed forward to West Kensington.

The houses in Carlington Road looked like an overcrowded row of tall thin men watching a football-match on a cold day; each red-faced house had a tree in front of it like an umbrella and trim white steps like spats; in a fantastic mood the comparison might be prolonged indefinitely, even so far as to say that, however outwardly uncomfortable they might appear, like enthusiastic spectators they were probably all aglow within. If John had been asked whether he liked an interior of pink lampshades and brass-gongs he would have replied emphatically in the negative; but on this chill November night he found the inside of Number 22 rather pleasant after the street. The maid looked doubtful over admitting him, which was not surprising, because an odour of hot soup in the hall and the chink of plates behind a closed door on the right proclaimed that the family was at dinner.

"Will you wait in the drawing-room, sir?" she enquired. "I'll inform Mr. Touchwood that you're here."

John felt a grim satisfaction in thus breaking in upon Hugh's dinner; there was nothing so well calculated to disturb even a tranquil conscience as an unexpected visit at such an hour; but the effect upon guilt would be . . .

## *Poor Relations.*

"Just say that a gentleman wishes to speak to you a minute. No name," he replied.

The walk through the dim streets coupled with the various crimes that his brother might have committed had perhaps invested John's rosy personality with a portentousness, for the maid accepted his instructions and was so much flustered by them that she forgot the gas in the drawing-room, of which John was assured himself that the heavily draped room in the light gave the final touch to the atmosphere of horror he aimed at creating; and he could not resist the door to enjoy the consternation in the dining-room beyond.

"What is it?"

A murmur from the maid.

"Well, you'd better finish your soup first; I won't let my soup get cold for anybody."

There followed a general buzz from the midst of which emerged, his long sallow face seeming longer than usual, anxiety, his long thin neck craning forward like an albatross's, and his bony fingers clutching a napkin which he dusted his legs nervously.

"Like a flag of truce," John thought, and almost simultaneously felt a sharp twinge of resentment at Hugh to sport a dinner-jacket with as much effrontery as he had been as white as that expanse of shirt.

"Good lord," Hugh exclaimed when he recognized his brother. "I thought you were a detective at least, and have some grub, won't you? Mrs. Fenton will be glad to see you."

John demurred to the invitation; judging by what he had been told about Mrs. Fenton's attitude toward him, he did not think that Touchwood was a welcome name in Grosvenor Road.

"Aubrey!" Hugh was shouting. "One of them has just blown in."

John felt sure that the rapid feminine voice he had just heard had a distinct note of expostulation in it; but when he earnestly made the objection, it was at once drowned in the

hospitality of Aubrey, who came beaming into the hall—a well set up young man of about twenty-five with a fresh complexion, glasses, an opal solitaire in his shirt, and a waxy white flower in his buttonhole.

“Do come in,” he begged with an encouraging wave of his napkin. “We’ve only just begun.”

Although John felt that by dining in this house he was making himself an accessory after the still undivulged fact he was really so hungry by now that he could not bring himself to refuse. He knew that he was displaying weakness, but he compounded with his austere self by arguing that he was more likely to arrive at the truth if he avoided anything in the nature of precipitate action.

Mrs. Fenton did not receive her guest as cordially as her son; in fact she showed plainly that she resented extremely his having been invited to dinner. She was a well-preserved woman and reminded John of a pink crystallized pear; her frosted transformation glistened like encrusted sugar round the stalk, which was represented by a tubular head-ornament on the apex of the carefully tended pyramid; her greeting was sticky.

“My son’s friend has spoken of you,” Mrs. Fenton was saying coldly in reply to John’s apologies for intruding upon her like this. He for his part was envying her ability to refer to Hugh without admitting his individual existence, when somebody kicked him under the table, and looking up he saw that Hugh was frowning at him in a cautionary manner.

“I’ve already met your brother the writer,” his hostess continued.

“My brother James?” asked John in amazement. He could not picture James in these surroundings.

“No, I have not had the pleasure of meeting him yet. I was referring to the dramatist, who has dined with me several times.”

“But,” John began, when another kick under the table silenced him.

“Pass the salt, will you, George, old boy?” Hugh said loudly.

## *Poor Relations*

John's soup was cold, but in the heat of his indignation he did not notice it. So George had querading in this house as himself; no wonder encouraged the idea of an interview with Hugh. a dishonest outrage had been perpetrated in his though Hugh might kick him under the table, he obtain his revenge by having Hugh kicked out of John took as much pleasure in his dinner that sandbag might have taken in being stuffed with son full when it was over, but it was a soulless affair; Mrs. Fenton who had done nothing except look down all through the meal left the table, he turned to Hugh.

"What does this gross impersonation mean?" he

Aubrey threw himself figuratively between them which only seemed to increase John's irritation.

"We wanted to jolly the mater along," he explained harm was intended, but Hughie was keen to prove ability; so as you and he weren't on the most convenient introduced your brother George as yourself. It was a moment really to your public character; but old C. enjoyed dining here, and I'm bound to say he mater some very decent port. In fact you're now."

"And I suppose," said John angrily, "that because you've perpetrated some discreditable fraud, what? you've been ordering shirts in my name as well as such? I'll disown the bill. You understand me? I you masquerading as a gentleman, Hugh, when you like one. It's obtaining money under false pretences can write to your mother till you're as blue in the ink in your bottle—it won't help you. I can tolerate laziness; I can tolerate stupidity; I can endure but I'm damned if I'll stand being introduced as C. indeed! Don't try to argue with me. You must face the consequences. Mr. Fenton, I'm sorry I allowed me inveigled like this into your mother's house. I shall tell her when I get home, and I hope she will take steps to get the impostor out. No, I won't have a cigar—though I."

I shall presently receive the bill for them, unless I've also been passed off as a tobacconist's agent by George. As for him, I've done with him too; I shall advertize in the *Times* that neither he nor Hugh has any business to order things in my name. I came here to-night in response to an urgent appeal; I find that I've been made a fool of; I find myself in a most undignified position. No, I will not have another glass of port. I don't know how much George exacted for it, but let me tell you that it isn't even good port: it's turbid and fiery."

John rose from the table and was making for the door, when Hugh took hold of his arm.

"Look here, old chap," he began.

"Don't attempt to soften me with pothouse endearments," said John fiercely. "I will not be called 'old chap.'"

"All right, old chap, I won't," said Hugh. "But before you go jumping into the street like a lighted cracker, please listen. Nobody has been ordering anything in your name. You're absolutely off the lines there. Why, I exhausted your credit years ago. And I don't see why you should grudge poor old George a few dinners."

"You rascal," John stammered. "You impudent rascal!"

"Don't annoy him, Hughie," Aubrey advised. "I can see his point."

"Oh you can, sir, can you?" John snapped. "You can understand, can you, how it affects me to be saddled with brothers like these and port like this?"

John was so furious that he could not bring himself to mention George or Hugh by name: they merely represented maddening abstractions of relationship, and he longed for some phrase like 'my son's friend' with which he might disown them for ever.

"You mustn't blame your brother George, Mr. Touchwood," urged Aubrey. "He's not involved in this latest affair. I'm sorry we told the mater that he was you, but the mater required jollying along, as I explained. She can't appreciate Hugh. He's too modern for her."

"I sympathize with Mrs. Fenton."

"You must forgive a ruse. It's just the kind of ruse I



"Whose name have you forged?" he brought himself to ask at last.

"Stephen Crutchley's."

"Good heavens!" he groaned. "But this is horrible. And has he found out? Does he know who did it?"

It was characteristic of John that he did not ask for how much his friend's name had been forged.

"He has his suspicions," Hugh admitted. "And he's bound to know pretty soon. In fact I think the only thing to do is for you to explain matters. After all, in a way it was a joke."

"Yes, a kind of experimental joke," Aubrey agreed.

"But it has proved to me how easy it is to cash a forged cheque," Hugh continued hopefully. "And of course if you talk to Crutchley he'll be all right. He's not likely to be very severe on the brother of an old friend. That was one of the reasons we experimented on him—that, and also partly because I found an old cheque-book of his. He's awfully careless, you know, is Stephen—very much the high-brow architect and all that, though he doesn't forget to charge. In fact so many people have had to pay for his name that it serves him right to find himself doing the same for once."

"Does Mrs. Fenton know anything of this?" John asked.

"Why, no," Aubrey answered quickly. "Well, women don't understand about money, do they? And the mater has less idea of the wicked world than most. My father was always a bit of a recluse, don't you see?"

"Was he?" John said sarcastically. "I should think his son will be a bit of a recluse too, before he's done. But forgery! No, it's incredible—incredible!"

"Don't worry, Johnnie," Hugh insisted. "Don't worry. I'm not worrying at all, now that you've come along. Nobody knows anything for certain yet. George doesn't know. Mama doesn't know. Mrs. Fenton doesn't know. And Stevie only guesses."

"How do you know that he guesses?" John demanded.

"Well, that's part of the story, eh, Aubrey?" said Hugh turning to his accomplice, who nodded sagely.

## Poor Relations

"Which I suppose one ought to tell in full, eh," he went on.

"I think it would interest your brother—I mean apart from his being your brother, it would interest a playwright," Aubrey agreed.

"Glasses round then," called Hugh cheerfully.

"There's a vacant armchair by the fireplace," pointed out to John.

"Thanks," said John stiffly. "I don't suppose comfort of an armchair will alleviate my feelings," he commanded Hugh. "Begin, and get it finished for heaven's sake, so that I can leave this house and my course of action in solitude."

"Do you know what it is, Johnnie?" Hugh said, his neck and examining his brother with an air of aroused curiosity. "You're beginning to dramatize. I suppose it's inevitable, but I wish you wouldn't. I get the same kind of embarrassed feeling that I get when you starts reciting. You're too subjective. That's the fault of the romantic writers. You want to get an objective view. You're not the only person on in this scene. I'm on too. Mrs. Fenton and Stevie Crutchley are with wings, as it were. And for all I know the police may be there too by this time. Get an objective viewpoint. Subjectivity went out with Rousseau."

"Confound your impudence," John spluttered.

"Yes, that's much better than talking about my course of action in solitude," Hugh approved. "Don't run away with the idea that I'm trying to annoy you. I've every reason to encourage the romantic side of you because finally it will be the romantic side of you that will shudder to behold your youngest brother in the fact I'm going the limit on your romance. At the same time I don't like to see you laying it on too thick. I'll give you fine feelings and all that. I'll grant you your nation, etcetera, etcetera. But try to see my point of view as your own. When you're thinking out a course of action in solitude, you'll light a cigar with a good old pipe, and you'll put your legs up on the mantelpiece unless y



old-maidish and afraid of scratching the furniture, and you'll pat your pass-book, which is probably suffering from fatty degeneration. That's a good phrase, Aubrey?"

"Devilish good," the accomplice allowed. "But look here, Hugh, steady—the mater gets rather bored if we keep the servants out of the dining-room too long, and I think your brother is anxious to have the story. So fire ahead, there's a good fellow."

Hugh looked hurt at the lack of appreciation which greeted the subtler shades of his discourse, but observing that John looked still more hurt at being kept waiting he made haste to begin without further reference to style.

"Well, you see, Johnnie, I've always been unlucky."

John made a gesture of impatience; but Hugh raised a sedative hand.

"I know there's nothing that riles lucky people so much as when unlucky people claim the prerogatives of their bad luck. I'm perfectly willing to admit that I'm lazier than you. But remember that energy is a gift, not an attainment. And I was born tired. The first stunning blow I had was when the old man died. You remember he always regarded me as a bit of an infant prodigy? So I was from his point of view, for he was over sixty when he begot me, and he used to look at me just as some people look at the silver cups they've won for races. But when he died, all the advantages of being the youngest son died with him, and I realised that I was an encumbrance. I'm willing to grant that I was a nuisance too, but . . . however, it's no use raking up old scores . . . I'm equally willing to admit that you've always treated me very decently and that I've always behaved very rottenly. I'll admit also that my taste in clothes was beyond my powers of gratification, that I liked wine and women—or to put a nicer point upon it—whisky and waitresses. I did. And what of it? You'll observe that I'm not going to try to justify myself. Have another glass of port? No, right-o, well, I will—I repeat I'm not going to attempt to justify myself, even if I couldn't, which I can, but in *vino veritas*, which I think you'll admit is Latin. Latin I said. Precisely. Where was I?"

"Hugh, old boy, buck up," his friend prompted anxiously.

## *Poor Relations*

"Come, sir," John said, trembling visibly with in-  
"Get on with your story while you can. I don't waste  
my time listening to the meanderings of a drunkard."

Hugh's eyes were glazing over like a puddle in frost  
knitted his brows and regarded his brother with intense  
concentration.

"Don't you try to take any literary advantage of me.  
You can dig out the longest word in the dictionary,  
I got a longer. *Metempsychosis*! Hear that? I'm  
admit that I don't like having to say it, but you find no  
man who can say it at all after George's port. *Metem-*  
And it's not a disease. No, no, no, no, don't you run  
the idea that it's a disease. Not at all. It's a religion.  
For three years I've been wasting valuable knowledge  
on an architect's office. Do you think Stevie wants  
about metempsychosis—that's the third time I've chattered  
of course he doesn't. Stephen Crutchley is a Goth.  
I? I'm a Palladian. There you have it. Am I right, John?"

"Quite right, old boy, only come to the point."

"That's all right, Aubrey, don't you be afraid. I'm  
along by the rails. You can lay a hundred pounds to  
George's cigars bar one. And that one's me. Where's  
yes. Well, I'm not going to say a word against Stephen.  
He's a friend of yours. He's my boss. He's one of  
leading ecclesiastical architects. But that doesn't help  
I find myself in a Somersetshire village seven miles  
nearest station arguing with a deaf parson about the ruin  
of his mouldy church. Does it? Of course not.  
help me when I find myself sleeping in damp sheets  
up for early service at seven o'clock by a cross  
gardener and a charwoman. Does it? Of course not.  
ture like everything else is a good job when you're  
flag on top of the tower; but when you're digging  
foundations it's rotten. Stevie and I have had our little  
but when he's sober—I mean when I'm sober—he  
thinks that there's not one of his juniors he thinks better of  
I'm against Gothic. I consider Gothic the mud-  
expression of a muddle-headed period. But I've  
to Stevie, only. . . ."

Hugh paused solemnly, while his friend regarded him with nervous solicitude.

"Only," Hugh repeated in a loud voice. "Metempsychosis," he murmured, and swallowing two more glasses of wine, he sat back in his chair and shook his head in mute despair of human speech.

Aubrey took John aside.

"I'm afraid Hugh's too far gone to explain all the details to-night," he whispered. "But it's really very serious. You see he found an old cheque-book of Mr. Crutchley's, and more for a joke than anything else he tried to see if it was difficult to cash a cheque. It wasn't. He succeeded. But he's suspected. I helped him indirectly, though of course I don't come into the business except as an accessory. Only, if you take my advice, you'll call on Mr. Crutchley as soon as you can, and I'm sure you'll be able to square things up. You'll know how to manage him; but Hugh has a way of exasperating him."

All the bland, the almost infantine simplicity of Aubrey Fenton's demeanour did not avail to propitiate John's rage; when the maid came in with a message from his hostess to ask if it would soon be convenient to allow the table to be cleared, he announced that he would not remain another minute in the house.

"But can Hugh count on your support?" Aubrey persisted. He spoke like an election agent who is growing rapidly doubtful of his candidate's prospects.

"He can count on nothing," said John violently. "He can count on nothing at all. On absolutely nothing at all."

Anybody who had seen Hugh's condition at this moment would have agreed with John. His eyes had already lost even as much life as might have been discerned in the slow freezing of a puddle, and had now assumed the glassy fixity and perfect roundness of two bottle-stoppers.

"He can count on nothing," John asseverated.

"I see," said Aubrey tactfully. "I'll try and get that across to him. Must you really be going?"

"Immediately."

"You'll trot in and say ta-ta to the mater?"

## Poor Relations

John had no wish ever again to meet that clypeus, but his politeness rose superior to his indignation, followed the son of the house into the drawing-room. The last glimpse of Hugh was of a mechanical figure, gesture of which was awkwardly to sequester every turn that the maid endeavoured to include in her of the table.

"It's scandalous," muttered John. "It's—it's about Mrs. Fenton," he said with a courtly bow for her hand. "I regret that your son has encouraged my brother to himself upon your good nature. I shall take steps that he shall do so no longer. I beg your pardon, Mrs. I apologize. Good night."

"I've always spoilt Aubrey," she said. "And had a mania for dangerous toys which he never could work properly. Never!" she repeated passionately.

For an instant the musty sugar in which she was cracked and allowed John a glimpse of the feminine underneath; but in the same instant the crystal was more complete than ever, and when John released he nearly took out his handkerchief to wipe away the mess.

"I say, what steps *are* you going to take to Aubrey asked.

"Never mind," John growled. Inasmuch as he had no more idea of what he intended to do than a reply was a good one.

Where Carlington Road flows into Hammersmith waited for a passing taxi, apostrophizing meanly the fogged stars in the London sky.

"I shall not forget to-night. No, I certainly doubt if any dramatist ever spent such another. A all the animals of the globe, a lunch that would be jackal vomit, a search for two lost children, an inter fatuous brother, a loan of over thirty pounds, a lady, a narrow escape from being bored to death by a dinner that gave me the sensation of being still alive, a glass of George's port, and for climax the brother has committed a forgery. How can I

Joan of Arc? A few more days like this and I shall never be able to think or write again—however, please God, there'll always be the cinema.”

Whirring home to Hampstead John fell asleep, and when he had supplemented that amount of repose in the taxi by eight hours in his own bed, he woke next morning with his mind made up to square matters with Stephen Crutchley, to withdraw Hugh from architecture, to intern him until Christmas at Ambles, and in the New Year to transport him to British Honduras as a mahogany-planter. He had met on board the *Murmania* a mahogany-planter who was visiting England for the first time in thirteen years: the profession must be an enthralling one.

It was only when John reached the offices of Stephen Crutchley in Staple Inn that he discovered it was Sunday, which meant another whole day's idleness and suspense, and he almost fell to wishing that he was in church again with Bertram and Viola. But there was a sweet sadness in this old paved court, where a few sparrows chirped their plaintive monotone from an overarching tree, the branches of which fretted a sky of pearly blue, and where several dreary men were sitting upon the benches regarding their frayed boots. John could not remain unsusceptible to the antique charm of the scene, and finding an unoccupied bench he rested there in the timid sunlight.

“What a place to choose for a forgery,” he murmured reproachfully, and tried to change the direction of his thoughts by remembering that Dr. Johnson had lived here for a time. He had no sooner concentrated upon fancies of that great man than he began to wonder if he was not mistaken in supposing that he had lived here, and he looked round for someone who could inform him. The dreary men with frayed boots were only counting the slow minutes of Divine Service before the public-houses could open: they knew nothing of the lexicographer. But the subject of forgery was not to be driven away by memories of Dr. Johnson, because his friend, Dr. Dodd, suddenly jumped into the train of thought, and it was impossible not to conjure up that poor and learned gentleman's last journey to Tyburn nor to reflect how the latticed dormers

## *Poor Relations*

on the Holborn side of the Inn were the same now as had actually seen Dr. Dodd go jolting past. John had thought how incomprehensible it was that scarcely a ago people should have been hanged for such crimes as but now it seemed rather more comprehensible. Oh he should not like to know that his brother was g hanged ; but for the sake of his future it would be an thing to revive capital punishment for minor crimes. like when all this dreadful business was settled to s brother, " Oh, by the way, Hugh, I hear they've jus bill making forgery a capital offence once more. I <sup>th</sup> like mahogany-planting."

But would the fear of death act as a deterrent up- one as Hugh, who after committing so dishonourabl had lacked even the grace to make his confession of : It was doubtful : Hugh was without shame. Fro his career had been undistinguished by a single dec- on the contrary, it had been steadily marred by vice from the time when he had stolen an unused set North Borneo stamps from the locker of his best frien- to this monstrous climax. Forgery ! Great heavens, b yet envisaged Hugh listening abjectly (or worse imp the strictures of a scornful judge ? Had he yet im headlines in the press ? BROTHER OF DISTINGUISHED SENT TO PENAL SERVITUDE. JUDGE'S SCATHING COMME TOUCHWOOD BREAKS DOWN IN COURT. MISS JANET DUCATION INDEFINITELY POSTPONED. Surely Stephen proceed to extreme measures, but for the sake of t sympathy spare his old friend this humiliation ; John reached this conclusion the chink-chink of i in the plane-tree sounded upon the air like the of the picks on Dartmoor. Hugh a convict ! It befall thus, if his jaunty demeanour hardened Step Suppose that Stephen should be seized with one of crises that can only be relieved by making an exam- body ? Would it not be as well to go down at once in the country and try to square matters, unem- Hugh's brazen impenitence ? Or was it alread John could not bring himself to believe that i :

would call in the police without warning him. Stephen had always had a generous disposition, and it might well be that rather than wound John's pride by the revelation of his brother's disgrace he had made up his mind to say nothing and to give Hugh another chance: that would be like Stephen. No, he should not intrude upon his week-end; though how he was going to pass the long Sunday unless he occupied himself with something more cheerful than his own thoughts he did not know. Should he visit James and Beatrice, and take them out to lunch with a Symphony Concert to follow? No, he should never be able to keep the secret of Hugh's crime, and James would inevitably wind up the discussion by making it seem as if it were entirely his own fault. Should he visit George and warn him that the less intercourse he had with Hugh the better, yes, and incidentally observe to George that he resented his impersonation of himself at Mrs. Fenton's? No, George's company would be as intolerable as his port. And the children? No, no, let them dress up with minds still untainted by their Uncle Hugh's shame; let them enact *Robinson Crusoe* and if they liked burn Halma House to the ground. What was unpremeditated arson compared with deliberate forgery? But if there was a genuine criminal streak in the Touchwoods, how was he ever again to feel secure of his relations' honour? To-morrow he might learn that James had murdered Beatrice because she had slept through the opening chapters of *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*. To-morrow he might learn that George was a defaulting bookmaker, that Hilda had embezzled the whole of Laurence's board, and that Harold was about to be prosecuted by the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Why, even his mother might have taken to gin-drinking in the small hours of the morning!

"God forgive me," said John. "I am losing my faith in humanity and my respect for my mother. Yet some imbeciles prate about the romance of crime."

John felt that if he continued to sit here brooding upon his relations he should be in danger of taking some violent step such as joining the Salvation Army: he remembered how an actor in *The Fall of Babylon* had brooded upon his inability to say his lines with the just emphasis he as author had required,

## Poor Relations

until on the night before the opening he had left it and become a Salvationist. One of the loafers in shuffled up to John and begged him for a match; complied he asked for something to use it on, and John much distressed by the faint likeness he bore to brother that he gave him a cigar.

"Without me that is what they would all be by now one of them, James, George, and Hugh," he thought I hadn't been lucky, so might I," he added to himself, "though at any rate I should have tried workhouse and not wasted my time cadging for Staple Inn."

John was not quite clear about workhouses; he done realistic writing before he dealt with work as it really is.

"However, I can't sit here depressing myself all sides, this bench is damp. What fools those sparrows stay chirping in that tree when they might be hopping in Hampshire—out of reach of Harold's air-gun and what a fool I am! But it's no use for me to go work at *Joan of Arc*. The English archers will only be broad arrows all the time. I'll walk slowly to think, and have an early lunch."

Perversely enough the Thespian did not seem to care sympathetic acquaintance, let alone a friend, that and after lunch John was reduced to looking at of famous dead players, which bored him nearly as one or two of the live ones who were lounging in the room.

"This is getting unendurable," he moaned, and then nothing for it but to sally forth and walk the hollow city. From Long Acre he turned into St. Mark's and shook off the temptation to bore himself still more by a visit to the National Gallery, and reached Strand Street. Three or four Sabbath loiterers were sitting in the window, and John saw that it was the offices of the T. & A. Line and that the attraction was a model of the S.S.

"What a fool I am!" John murmured much more callously than in Staple Inn. He was just going to call



to drive him to Chelsea, when he experienced from yesterday a revulsion against taxis. Yesterday had been a nightmare of taxis, between driving to the Zoo and driving to the police-station and driving home after that interview with the forger—by this time John had discarded Hugh as a relation—not to mention Mrs. Worfolk in a taxi, and the children in a taxi, and their luggage buzzing backward and forward between Earl's Court and Hampstead in a taxi. No, he should walk to Chelsea: a brisk walk with an objective would do him good. 83 Camera Square! It was indeed rather a tribute to his memory, he flattered himself, that he could remember her address without referring to her card. He should walk along the Embankment; it was only half-past two now.

It was pleasant walking by the river on that fine afternoon, and John felt as he strode along Grosvenor Road, his spirit rising with the eager tide, that after all there was nothing like the sea, nothing!

"As soon as I've finished *Joan of Arc*, I shall take a sea-voyage. It's all very well for George to talk about sea-voyages, but let him do some work first. Even if I do send him for a sea-voyage, how will he spend his time? I know perfectly well. He'll feel seasick for the first week and play poker for the rest of the passage. No, no, after the Christmas holidays at Ambles he'll be as right as a trivet without a sea-voyage. What is a trivet by the way? Now if I had a secretary, I should make a note of a query like that. As it is, I shall probably never know what a trivet is; but if I had a secretary, I should ask her to look it up in the dictionary when we got home. I daresay I've lost thousands of ideas by not having a secretary at hand. I shall have to advertize—or find out in some way about a secretary. Thank heaven, neither Hilda nor Beatrice nor Eleanor nor Edith knows shorthand. But even if Edith did know shorthand, she'd be eternally occupied with the dactylography—as I suppose *he'd* call it—of Laurence's apostolic successes—there's another note I might make. Of course, it's nothing wonderful as a piece of wit, but I might get an epigram worth keeping, say three times a week, if I had a secretary at my elbow. I don't believe that Stephen will make any difficulties about Hugh. Oh no, I don't think so. I was

## Poor Relation.

tired this morning after yesterday. This events in their right proportion. Rosifica brings out these things as if he were a se but in my opinion wit without humor, without butter. And even if I do rosify \* that Lady Teazle says? *I wish it were spring and that roses grew under our feet.* And it rosify such moral anæmia as Hugh's. By just exactly whereabouts in Chelsea Camera

Now if there was one thing that John \* thing that dragged even his buoyant spirit there was one thing worse than having a relation, it was to be compelled to ask his London within the four miles radius. He w admit to himself more than that he did whereabouts of Camera Square. Although the remotest idea beyond its location in the of Chelsea where Camera Square was, he w in dancing a kind of ladies' chain with all r King's Road and never catching a glimpse o It was at last born in upon him that if he Mrs. Hamilton at a respectable hour for aftern simply have to ask his way.

Now arose for John the problem of cho He walked on and on, half making up his mind to accost somebody and when he was on the p perceiving in his expression a latent haughtin back until it was too late. Had it not been Su have entered a shop and bought something suffi to bribe the shopman from looking astonished Presently, however, he passed a tobacconist's, and three of the best cigars he had, which were not asked casually as he was going out the directi Square. The shopman did not know. He ca tobacconist's, bought three more cigars, and that not know either. Gradually with a sharp sense disgrace it dawned upon John that he must ask He turned aside from the many inviting polic mainroad, where the contemptuous of way

presume his rusticity, and tried to find a policeman in a secluded by-street. This took another half-an-hour, and when John did accost this ponderous hermit of the force he accosted him in broken English.

"Ees thees ze vay to Cahmehra Squah?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders in what he conceived to be the gesture of a Frenchman who had landed that morning from Calais.

"Eh?"

"Cahmehra Squah?" John repeated.

The policeman put his hand in his pocket, and John thought he was going to whistle for help; but it was really to get out a handkerchief to blow his nose and give him time to guess what John wanted to know.

"Say it again, will yer?" the policeman requested.

John repeated his Gallic rendering of Camera.

"I ain't seen it round here. Where do you say you dropped it?"

"Eet ees a place I yants."

What slow-witted oafs the English were, thought John with a compassionate sigh for the poor foreigners who must be lost in London every day. However, this policeman was so loutish that he felt he could risk an almost perfect pronunciation.

"Oh, Kemmerer Squer," said the policeman with a huge smile of comprehension. "Why, you're looking at it." He pointed along the road.

"Damn," thought John. "I needn't have asked at all. Sank you. Good evenning," he said aloud.

"The same to you and many of them, Napoleon," the policeman nodded.

John hurried away, and soon he was walking along a narrow garden, very unlike a London garden, for it was full of frost-bitten herbaceous flowers and smelt of the country. Not a house on this side of the square resembled its neighbour; but Number 83 was the most charmingly odd of all—two stories high, with a little Chinese balcony and jasmine over a queer pointed porch of wrought iron.

"Yes, sir, Mrs. Hamilton is at home," said the maid.

The last bars of something by Schumann or Chopin died away; in the comparative stillness that succeeded John could

## *Poor Relation*

hear a canary singing, and the tinkle of also a smell of muffins and—mimosa, was very delicious, he thought, while he made as possible, so as not to fill the tiny hall.

“Mr. Touchwood was the name?” the  
“What an intelligent young woman! intelligent than that policeman. But intelligent in small things,” he thought, as to enter the drawing-room.

## Chapter Nine

A SUDDEN apprehension of his bulk (though he was only comparatively massive) overcame John when he stood inside the tiny drawing-room of 83 Camera Square; and it was not until the steam from the tea-pot had materialized into Miss Hamilton, who in a dress of filmy grey floated round him as a cloud swathes a mountain, that he felt at ease.

"Why, how charming of you to keep your word," her well-remembered voice, so soft and deep, was murmuring. "You don't know my mother, do you? Mother, this is Mr. Touchwood, who was so kind to Ida and me on the voyage back from America."

Mrs. Hamilton was one of those mothers that never destroy the prospects of their children by testifying outwardly to what their beauty may one day come: neither in face nor in expression nor in gesture nor in voice did she bear the least resemblance to her daughter. At first John was inclined to compare her to a diminutive clown; but presently he caught sight of some golden mandarins marching across a lacquer cupboard and decided that she resembled a mandarin; after which wherever he looked in the room he seemed to catch sight of her miniature—on the willow-pattern plates, on the mantel-piece in porcelain, and even on the red lacquer bridge that spanned the tea-caddy.

"We've all heard of Mr. Touchwood," she said, picking up a small silver weapon in the shape of a pea-shooter and puffing out her already plump cheeks in a vain effort to extinguish the flame of the spirit-lamp. "And I'm devoted to the drama. Pouf! I think this is a very dull instrument, dear. What would England be without Shakespeare? Pouf! Pouf! One blows and blows and blows and blows till really—well, it has taught me never to regret that I did not learn the flute when there was a question of my having lessons. Pouf! Pouf!"

John offered his services as extinguisher.

"You have to blow very hard," she warned him; and he



A SUDDEN apprehension of his bulk (though he was only comparatively massive) overcame John when he stood inside the tiny drawing-room of 83 Camera Square; and it was not until the steam from the tea-pot had materialized into Miss Hamilton, who in a dress of filmy grey floated round him as a cloud swathes a mountain, that he felt at ease.

"Why, how charming of you to keep your word," her well-remembered voice, so soft and deep, was murmuring. "You don't know my mother, do you? Mother, this is Mr. Touchwood, who was so kind to Ida and me on the voyage back from America."

Mrs. Hamilton was one of those mothers that never destroy the prospects of their children by testifying outwardly to what their beauty may one day come: neither in face nor in expression nor in gesture nor in voice did she bear the least resemblance to her daughter. At first John was inclined to compare her to a diminutive clown; but presently he caught sight of some golden mandarins marching across a lacquer cupboard and decided that she resembled a mandarin; after which wherever he looked in the room he seemed to catch sight of her miniature—on the willow-pattern plates, on the mantel-piece in porcelain, and even on the red lacquer bridge that spanned the tea-caddy.

"We've all heard of Mr. Touchwood," she said, picking up a small silver weapon in the shape of a pea-shooter and puffing out her already plump cheeks in a vain effort to extinguish the flame of the spirit-lamp. "And I'm devoted to the drama. Pouf! I think this is a very dull instrument, dear. What would England be without Shakespeare? Pouf! Pouf! One blows and blows and blows and blows till really—well, it has taught me never to regret that I did not learn the flute when there was a question of my having lessons. Pouf! Pouf!"

John offered his services as extinguisher.

"You have to blow very hard," she warned him; and he

## Poor Relations

being determined at all costs to impress Miss Hamilton like a knight-errant at the gate of an enchanted castle almost too vigorous a blast: besides extinguishing it blew several currants from the cake into Mrs. Lap, which John in an access of good-will tried again less successfully.

"Bravo," the old lady exclaimed, clapping her hands glad to see that it can be done. But didn't you *Walls of Jericho*? Ah no, I'm thinking of John's trumpet."

"*The Fall of Babylon*, mother," Miss Hamilton smiled, in the curves of which quivered a hint of

"Then I was not so far out. *The Fall of Babylon*. Oh, what a fall was there, my countrymen."

She beamed at the author encouragingly, responsively back at her; presently she began to herself, and John, hoping that in his wish to be Miss Hamilton's mother he was not appearing too a hen, chuckled back.

"I'm glad you have a sense of humour," she suddenly assuming an intensely serious expression and up her eyebrows like two skipping-ropes.

John, who felt as if he were playing a game, expression as well as he was able.

"I live on it," she pursued. "And thrive on a small income and an ample sense of humour. One avoids extravagance oneself, but enjoys it in others."

"And how is Miss Merritt?" John enquired of her, when he had bowed his appreciation of her. But before she could reply, her mother rattled off

"Miss Merritt will not take Doris to America. Miss Merritt has written a book called *The Aphorisms of*

The old lady's remarkable eyebrows were darting over her forehead like forked lightning while she spoke.

"The aphorisms of Aphrodite!" she said, "a collection of some of the most declassical observations I have ever encountered." Like a diver's arms she clasped herself together for a plunge into the unfathomable depths.



"My dear mother, lots of people found it very amusing," her daughter protested.

"Miss Merritt," the old lady asserted, "was meant for keeping by double-entry, instead of which she has taken book-writing by double-entente. The profits may be all right, but the method is base. How did she affect you, Mr. T. Wood?"

"She frightened me," John confessed. "I thought her manner somewhat severe."

"You hear that, Doris? Her ethical exterior frightened him."

"You're both very unfair to Ida. I only wish I had her talents."

"Wrapped in a napkin," said the old lady, "you have your shorthand."

John's heart leapt.

"Ah, you know shorthand," he could not help ejaculating with manifest pleasure.

"I studied for a time. I think I had vague ideas once of a commercial career," she replied indifferently.

"The suggestion being," Mrs. Hamilton put in, "that discouraged her. But how is one to encourage shorthand? If she had learnt the deaf and dumb alphabet I might have put aside half-an-hour every day for conversation. But it is as hard to encourage shorthand as to encourage a person who is talking in his sleep."

John fancied that beneath the indifference of the daughter and the self-conscious humour of the mother he could detect cross-currents of mutual disapproval; he could have sworn that the daughter was beginning to be perpetually aware of her mother's presence.

"Or is it due to my obsession that relations should never see too much of each other?" he asked himself. "Yet she knows shorthand—an extraordinary coincidence. What a delightful house you have," he said aloud with as much fervour as would excuse the momentary abstraction into which he had been cast.

"My husband was a sinologue," Mrs. Hamilton announced.

"Was he indeed?" said John, trying to focus the word.



ready, her mother leaned over and tapped John's arm with fan.

"I'm getting extremely anxious about Doris," she confided; the eyebrows hovering in her forehead like a hawk about to strike gave her listener the impression that she was really going to say something this time.

"Her health?" he began anxiously.

"Her health is perfect. It is her independence which worries me. Hence this house! Her father's brother is only too willing to do anything for her, but she declines to be a poor relation. Now such an attitude is ridiculous, because she *is* a poor relation. To each overture from her uncle she replies with defiance. At one moment she drowns his remarks in a typewriter; at another she flourishes her shorthand in his face; and this summer she fled to America before he had finished what he was saying. Mr. Touchwood, I rely on you!" she exclaimed, thumping him on the shoulder with the fan.

John felt himself to be a very infirm prop for the old lady's ambition, and wobbled in silence while she heaped upon him her aspirations.

"You are a man of the world. All the world's a stage! Prompt her, my dear Mr. Touchwood, prompt her. You must have had a great experience of prompting. I rely on you. Her uncle *must* be allowed to help her. For pray appreciate that Doris's independence merely benefits charitable institutions, and in my opinion there is a limit to anonymous benevolence. Perhaps you've heard of the Home for Epileptic Gentlewomen? They can have their fits in peace and comfort entirely because my daughter refuses to accept one penny from her uncle. To a mother, of course, such behaviour is unaccountable. And what is so unjust is that she won't allow me to accept a penny either, but has even gone so far as to threaten to live with Miss Merritt if I do. Aphorisms of Aphrodite! I can assure you that there are times when I do not regret that I possess an ample sense of humour. If you were a mother, Mr. Touchwood . . ."

"*I am* an uncle," said John quickly. He was not going to let Mrs. Hamilton monopolize all the privileged woes of kinship.

"Then who more able to advise a niece? She will listen to you. Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. You

## *Poor Relations*

must remember that she already admires you as a  
Insist that in future she must admire you from  
instead of from the pit—as now. At present she  
Do not misunderstand me. I speak in metaphors  
pinched by straightened circumstances just as the  
China are pinched by their shoes. She declines  
hobble-skirt; but decline or not, she hobbles on.  
She cannot do otherwise, which is why we live here  
Square like two spoonfuls of tea in an old caddy!

“But you know, personally,” John protested, while  
lady was fanning back her lost breath, “personally,  
now speaking as an uncle, personally I must confess  
independence charms me.”

“Music hath charms,” said Mrs. Hamilton.  
deny it? And independence with the indefinite  
it also hath charms; but independence with no  
independence, the abstract noun, though it may  
virtue, is a private vice. Vesuvius lends variety  
Naples; but a tufted mole on a woman’s cheek  
observer with adhorrence, like a woolly caterpillar  
heart of a rose. Let us distinguish between the  
individual. Do, my dear Mr. Touchwood,  
preserve a distinction between wild nature and hu-

John was determined not to give way, and he  
firmly asserted his admiration for independence.

“All the world’s a stage,” said Mrs. Hamilton.  
all the men and women merely players; yet life,  
wood, is not a play. I have realized that since  
died. The widow of a sinologue has much to read  
I hoped that Doris would marry. But she has not  
marry. Men proposed in shoals. But as I always  
‘What is the use of proposing to my daughter?  
marry.’”

For the first time John began to pay a deep and  
attention to the conversation.

“Really I should have thought,” he began; but  
himself abruptly, for he felt that it was not quite  
him to appraise Miss Hamilton’s matrimonial  
“I doubt Miss Hamilton is very critical,” he sub-

*Blue ink on page 40*

"She would criticize anybody," the old lady exclaimed "From the Creator of us all in general to her own mother in particular she would criticize anybody. Anbody that is except Miss Merritt. Do not suppose, for instance, that she will not criticize you."

"Oh, I have no hope of escaping," John said.

"But pay no attention and continue to advise her. Really when I think that on account of her obstinacy a number of epileptic females are enjoying luxurious convulsions while I am compelled to alternate between muffins and scones every day of the week, though I never know which I like better really I resent our unnecessary poverty. As I say to her whether we accept her uncle's offer or not, we are always poor relations; so we may as well be comfortably-off poor relations."

"Don't you suppose that perhaps her uncle is all the fondle of her because of this independence?" John suggested. "I think I should be."

"But what is the use of that?" Mrs. Hamilton demanded "Nothing is so bad for people as stunted affection. My husband spent all his patrimony—he was a younger son—everything he had in fact upon his passion for Chinese—well, not quite everything, for he was able to leave me a small income which I share with Doris. Pray remember that I have never denied her anything that I could afford. Although she has many times plotted with her friend Ida Merritt to earn her own living, I have never once encouraged her in such a step. The idea to me has always been painful. A sense of humour has carried me through life; but Doris, alas, is infected with gloom. Whether it is living in London or whether it is reading Nietzsche I don't know, but she is infested with gloom. Therefore when I heard of her meeting you I was glad; I was almost reconciled to the notion of that vulgar descent upon America. Pray do not imagine that I am trying to flatter: you should be used to public approbation by now. John Hamilton is her uncle's name, and he has a delightful estate near the Mull of Kintyre—Glencockie House—some of the rents of which provide carpets for the fits of epileptic gentlewomen and some the children of indigent tradesmen in Ayr with colonial

## *Poor Relations*

opportunities. Yet his sister-in-law must choose even between muffins and scones."

John tried unsuccessfully to change the conversation even went so far as to ask the old lady questions about adventures in China, although it was one of the rules of conduct never to expose himself unnecessarily to the criticisms of travellers.

"Yes, yes," she would reply impatiently, "the temple gardens are delicious. Ding-dong! d' as I was saying, unless Doris sees her way to be outwardly gracious . . ." and so it went on until she herself dressed in that misty green Harris tweed of which she came in to say that she was ready.

"My dear child," her mother protested. "London are empty on Sunday evening, but the Highland moor. What queer notions of dress to be sure."

"Ida and I are going out to supper with some in Norwood, and I want to keep warm in the air."

"One of the aphorisms of Aphrodite, I suppose," said John, "is that a Norfolk jacket—or should I say a Norwood jacket—is the best for a Sunday evening. You must excuse her, Mr. Touchwood."

John was by this time thoroughly bored by witticisms and delighted to leave her to fan herself in the light, while he and her daughter walked along the Road.

"No sign of a taxi," said John, whose mind was running in shorthand, though he was much too shy to raise the subject a second time. "You don't mind going as far as the station by motor-bus?"

A moment later they were climbing to the motor-bus; when John pulled the waterproof over his knees and felt the wind in his face while they were sitting apart in the rapid motion, he could not help thinking that they were once again upon the Atlantic.

"I often think of our crossing," he said in a low voice, an harmonious mixture of small talk and sentiment.

"So do I."



## Poor Relations

congratulated himself, he had managed to arrange for Wednesday and need no longer reproach him complete deadlock.

"I must hurry," she warned him when they had to the pavement.

"Wednesday at one o'clock then."

He would have liked to detain her with elaborate about the exact spot on the carpet where she would waiting for her on Wednesday ; but she had shaken by the hand and crossed the road before he could between the entrance in the Haymarket and in Pall Mall.

"It is becoming every day more evident, Mr. John told his housekeeper after supper that I must begin to look about for a secretary."

"Yes, sir," she agreed cheerfully. "There's lots of young fellows would be glad of the job, I'm sure."

John left it at that, acknowledged Mrs. W for his night's repose, poured himself out a whisky and settled himself down to read a gilded shillings net entitled *Fifteen Famous Forgers*. At three shillings' worth, he decided that which possessed a literary interest for any principal was murder, and went to bed to prepare for the painful interview at Staple Inn.

Stephen Crutchley, the celebrated architect older than John, old enough in fact to be affected by the æsthetic movement in his day, had a secret belief that was nourished both by his Gothic design and by his wife's lilies and formed a link with the Pre-Raphaelites. He was six feet six inches high, but short though they were managed to remain an inch shorter than in conjunction with a ponderous body made between a limp and a shamble. He had a face which looked as if he had dropped an egg on his head according to whether the person who was looking at it thought it was more grey or more yellow usually referred to by paragraph writers as



regretted that his beard was turning grey so soon, when what the same writers called his 'tawny mane of hair' was still unwithered. He affected the Bohemian costume of the 'eighties, that is to say the velvet jacket, the flowered silk waistcoat, and the unknotted tie of deep crimson or old gold kept in place by a prelate's ring; he lunched every day at the Arts Club, and since he was making at least £6000 a year, he did not bother to go back to his office in the afternoon. John had met him first soon after his father's death in 1890 in a small Northamptonshire town, where Crutchley was restoring a church—his first big job—and where John was editing temporarily a local paper. In those days John reacting from dog-biscuits was every bit as romantic as he was now; he and the young architect had often talked the sun up and spoken ecstatically of another mediæval renaissance, of the nobility of handicrafts and of the glory of the guilds. Later on, when John in the reaction from journalism embarked upon realistic novels, Crutchley was inclined to quarrel with him as a renegade, and even went so far as to send him a volume of Browning's poems with *The Lost Leader* heavily marked in red pencil. Considering that Crutchley was making much more money with his gargoyles than himself with his novels John resented the accusation of having deserted his friend for a handful of silver; and as for the ribbon which he was accused of putting in his coat, John thought that the architect was the last person to underline such an accusation, when himself for the advancement of his work had joined every ecclesiastical society from the English Church Union to the Alcuin Club. There was not a ritualistic parson in the land who wanted with or without a faculty to erect a rood or reredos but turned to Crutchley for his design, principally because his watch-chain jingled with religious labels; although to do him justice, even when he was making £6000 a year he continued to attend Choral Eucharists as regularly as ever. When John abandoned realistic novels and made a success as a romantic playwright his friend welcomed him back to the Gothic fold with emotion and enthusiasm.

"You and I, John, are almost the only ones left," the architect had said feelingly.

## *Poor Relations*

"Come, come, Stephen, you mustn't talk as if I de Morgan. I'm not yet forty, and you're not yet John had replied, slightly nettled by this ascription to a bygone period.

Yet with all his absurdities and affectations St fine fellow and a fine architect, and when soon had agreed to take Hugh into his office John forgiven him if he had chosen to perambulate doublet and hose.

Thinking of Stephen as he had known him for John had no qualms when on Monday morning the winding stone steps that led up to his office portion of Staple Inn; nor apparently had Hugh in as jauntily as ever and greeted his brother with possession.

"I thought you'd blow in this morning. Aubrey half-a-dollar you'd blow in. He tells in rather a bad temper on Saturday night. But right, Johnnie; that port of George's is not quite right. I shall always respect your v future."

"This is not the moment to talk about angrily.

"I'm afraid that owing to George and elderberry ink I didn't put my case quite as to have done," Hugh went on serenely. "As soon as you've settled with Stevie, I shall it. I think you'll be thrilled. It's a pity Wardour Street, or you might have made a it."

One of the clerks came back with an invitation follow him into Mr. Crutchley's own room, a escape from his brother's airy impenitence.

"Wonderful how Stevie acts up to the commented Hugh, when he saw John looking timbered rooms with their ancient furniture blazonries through which they were

"I prefer to see Crutchley alone doubt he will send for you when you

Hugh nodded amiably and went over to his desk in one of the latticed oriel windows, the noise of the Holborn traffic surging in through which reminded the listener that these perfectly mediæval rooms were in the heart of modern London.

"I should rather like to live in chambers here myself," thought John. "I believe they would give me the very atmosphere I require for *Joan of Arc*; and I should be close to the theatres."

This project appealed to him more than ever when he entered the architect's inmost sanctum, which containing nothing that did not belong to the best period of whatever it was, wrought iron or carved wood or embroidered stuff, impressed John's eye for a scenic effect. Nor was there too much of it: the room was austere, not even so full as a Carpaccio interior. Modernity here wore a figleaf; wax candles were burned instead of gas or electric light; and even the telephone was enshrined in a Florentine casket. When the oaken door covered with huge nails and foliated hinges was closed, John sat down upon what is called a Glastonbury chair and gazed at his friend who was seated upon a gilt throne under a canopy of faded azure embroidered with golden unicorns, wyverns, and other fabulous monsters in a pasture of silver fleurs-de-lys.

"Have a cigar," said the Master, as he liked to be called, pushing across the refectory table that had come out of an old Flemish monastery a primitive box painted with scenes of saintly temptation, but lined with cedar wood and packed full of fat Corona Coronas.

"It seems hardly appropriate to smoke cigars in this room," John observed. "Even a churchwarden-pipe would be an anachronism here."

"Yes, yes," Stephen assented, tossing back his hair with the authentic Vikingly gesture. "But cigars are the chief consolation we have for being compelled to exist in this modern world. I haven't seen you, John, since you returned from America. How's work?"

"*Lucretia* went splendidly in New York. And I'm in the middle of *Joan of Arc* now."

## *Poor Relations*

"I'm glad, I'm glad," the architect growled as one of the great Victorians. "But for Heaven's sake coats right. Theatrical heraldry is shocking. And ecclesiastical details right. Theatrical ritual is . . . I'm glad you're giving 'em Joan of Arc. Keep it up. The modern drama wants disinfecting."

"I suppose you wouldn't care to advise me about tumes and processions and all that," John suggested to his friend a pinch of his romantic Sanitas.

"Yes, I will. Of course, I will. But I must have a . . . An absolutely free hand, John. I won't have any . . . play-actor trying to tell me that it doesn't matter . . . in the fifteenth century does wear a sixteenth cen . . . because it's more effective from the gallery. Eh? . . . them. You know them. A free hand or you can . . . on an asbestos gasfire, and I won't help you."

"Your help would be so much appreciated," John said to him, "that I can promise you an absolutely short . . . The architect stared at the dramatist.

"What did I say? I meant free hand—extraord . . . John laughed a little awkwardly. "Yes, your na . . . is just what we shall require to persuade the scepti . . . worth while making another attempt with Joan of . . . promise you some fine opportunities. I've got a . . . effective tableau to show the miserable condition . . . before the play begins. The curtain will rise upc . . . guard of an army marching out of a city; heavy sno . . . and above the silence you will hear the howling of . . . following in the track of the troops. This is an his . . . I may even introduce several wolves upon the . . . rather doubt if trained wolves are procurable, al . . . pinch we could use large dogs—but don't let me . . . my own work like this. I did not come here this . . . talk about Joan of Arc, but about my brother Hugh.

John rose from his chair and walked nervously u . . . the room, while Stephen Crutchley managed to . . . slight roughness at the back of his throat into a v . . . coughing.

"I see you feel it as much as I do," John mu . . .

the architect continued to express his overwrought feeling in bronchial spasms.

"I would have spared you this," he managed to gasp out finally.

"I'm sure you would," said John warmly. "But since in what I hope was a genuine impulse of contrition not entirely dictated by motives of self-interest Hugh has confessed his crime to me, I am come here this morning confident that you will allow me to—in other words—what was the exact sum I shall of course remove him from your tutelage this morning."

John's eloquence was not spontaneous; he had rehearsed this speech on the way down from Hampstead, and he was agreeably surprised to find that he had been able owing to his friend's coughing-fit to reproduce nearly all of it. He had so often been robbed of a prepared oration by some unexpected turn of the conversation that he felt now much happier than he ought under the weight of a family scandal.

"Your generosity . . ." he continued.

"No, no," interrupted the architect, "it is you who are generous."

The two romantics gazed at one another with an expression of nobility that required no words to enhance it.

"We can afford to be generous," said John, which was perfectly true, though the reference was to worth of character rather than to worth of capital.

"Eighty-one pounds six and eightpence," Crutchley murmured. "But I blame myself. I should not have left an old cheque-book lying about. It was careless—it was, I do not hesitate to say so, criminally careless. But you know my attitude towards money. I am radically incapable of dealing with money."

"Of course you are," John assented with conviction. "So am I. Money with me is merely a means to an end."

"Exactly what it is with me," the architect declared. "Money in itself conveys nothing to me. What I always say to my clients is that if they want the best work they must pay for it. It's the work that counts, not the money."

"Precisely my own attitude," John agreed. "What people will not understand is that an artist charges a high price when

## *Poor Relations*

he does not want to do the work. If people insist on it, they must expect to pay."

"And of course," the architect added, "we owe our fellows to sustain the dignity of our professions. England has already been too much cheapened."

"You've kept all your old enthusiasms," John told him. "It's splendid to find a man who is not spoiled. Eighty-one pounds you said? I've brought my cheque."

"Eighty-one pounds six and eightpence, yes. Thank you, John, to come forward in this way. But I wish I had not have been spared. You understand, don't you, that I had to say nothing about it and to blame myself in silence for my carelessness? On the other hand, I could not have done that to my brother with my former confidence. This terrible incident has disturbed our whole relationship."

"I am not going to enlarge on my feelings," said John, and he handed the architect the stolen sum. "But you will understand them. I believe the shock has aged me. I seem to have lost some of my self-reliance. Only this morning I was telling myself that I must really get a private secretary."

"You certainly should have one," the architect agreed.

"Yes, I must. The only thing is that since the escapade of Hugh's I feel that an unbusinesslike man as I am ought not to put himself in the hands of a woman. What is your experience of women? From a business point of view, I mean."

"I think that a woman would do your work better than a man," said the architect decidedly.

"So do I. I'm very glad to have your advice, thank you."

After this John felt no more reluctance at accepting the eighty-one pounds six and eightpence than he would have felt at paying a specialist two guineas for advising him to take a long rest when he wanted to take a long rest. His aloofness from money had raised to a higher level. It would have been a most unpleasant transaction: none of his heroes could have extricated himself from such a situation more poetically and more sympathetically. Only remained to dispose of the villain.

"Shall we have Hugh in?" he asked.

"I wish I could keep him with me," the architect sighed. "But I don't think I have a right to consult my personal feelings. We must consider his behaviour in itself."

"In any case," said John quickly, "I have made arrangements about his future; he is going to be a mahogany-planter in British Honduras."

"Of course I don't use mahogany much in my work, but if ever . . ." the architect was beginning, when John waved aside his kindly intentions.

"The impulse is generous, Stephen, but I should prefer that as far as you are concerned Hugh should always be as if he had never been. In fact, I'm bound to say frankly that I'm glad you do not use mahogany in your work. I'm glad that I've chosen a career for Hugh which will cut him completely off from what to me will always be the painful associations of architecture."

While they were waiting for the sinner to come in, John tried to remember the name of the mahogany-planter whom he had met in the *Murmania*; but he could get no nearer to it than a vague notion that it might have been Raikes, and he decided to leave out for the present any allusion to British Honduras.

Hugh entered his chief's room without a blush: he could not have bowed his head, however sincere his repentance, because his collars would not permit the least abasement; though at least, his brother thought, he might have had the decency not to sit down until he was invited, and when he did sit down not to pull up his trousers in that aggressive way and expose those very defiant socks.

Stephen Crutchley rose from his throne and shambled over to the fire-place, leaning against the stone hood of which he took up an attitude that would have abashed anybody but Hugh.

"Touchwood," he began, "no doubt you have already guessed why I have asked you to speak to me."

Hugh nodded encouragingly.

"I do not wish to enlarge upon the circumstances of your behaviour, because your brother, my old friend, has come forward to shield you from the consequences. Nor do I

## *Poor Relations*

propose to animadvert upon forgery in itself. I wish you embarked upon it, I don't doubt that by now sufficiently realized its gravity. What tempted you to this crime I do not hope to guess; but I fear that even for obtaining money must have been inspired by debauchery for cards or for horse-racing, or perhaps even for what I cannot pretend to know."

"Add waistcoats and whisky and you've got the whole thing," Hugh chirped. "I say, I think your trousers are a little tight." He added on a note of anxious consideration.

"I do not propose to enlarge on any of these topics," said the architect moving away from the fire and into the fresh air, the faint odour of overheated homespun. "What I wish to enlarge upon is your brother's generosity in connection with this. Naturally I who have known him for so long expected nothing else, because he is a man of ideas, of whom we are all proud, from whom we all learn things and—however I am not going to enlarge upon his obvious qualities. What I do wish to say is that he has decided that after this business you must leave, and I suppose that you expected to remain; nor, even if I do I suppose that you would wish to remain. Perhaps I am not enough in sympathy with my aspirations for English architecture to regret our parting; but this lesson you have had will be the means of bringing about a better appreciation of what your brother has done for you in British Honduras you will behave in such a way as to repay his generosity. Touchwood, 'good-bye! I did not expect when you came to me three years ago that our parting would be fraught—would be so unpleasant."

John was probably much more profoundly moved by the clergyman's sermon than Hugh; indeed he was so much so that he rose to supplement it with one of his own in which he said the same things about the architect that the architect had said about him, after which the two romantics gazed at each other admiringly, while they waited for Hugh to speak.

"I suppose I ought to say I'm very sorry," said Hugh managed to mutter at last. "Good-bye, Noddy, and jolly good luck. I'll just toddle through the



good-bye to all the boys, John, and then I daresay you'll be ready for lunch."

He swaggered out of the room; when the two friends were left together they turned aside with mutual sympathy from the topic of Hugh to discuss *Joan of Arc* and a new transept that Crutchley was designing. When the culprit put his head round the door and called out to John that he was ready, the two old friends shook hands affectionately and parted with an increased regard for each other and themselves.

"Look here, what's all this about British Honduras?" Hugh asked indignantly when he and his brother had passed under the arched entry of Staple Inn and were walking along Holborn. "I see you're bent on gratifying your appetite for romance even in the choice of a colony. British Honduras! British humbug!"

"I prefer not to discuss anything except your immediate future," said John.

"It's such an extraordinary place to hit on," Hugh grunted in a tone of irritated perplexity.

"The immediate future," John repeated sharply. "Tonight you will go down to Hampshire and if you wish for any more help from me, you will remain there in the strictest seclusion until I have time to settle your ultimate future."

"Oh, I shan't at all mind a few weeks in Hampshire. What I'm grumbling at is British Honduras. I shall rather enjoy Hampshire in fact. Who's there at present?"

John told him, and Hugh made a grimace.

"I shall have to jolly them up a bit. However, it's a good job that Laurence has lost his faith. I shall be spared his Choral Eucharists, anyway. Where are we going to lunch?"

"Hugh!" exclaimed his outraged brother stopping short in the middle of the crowded pavement. "Have you no sense of shame at all? Are you utterly callous?"

"Look here, Johnnie, don't start in again on that. I know you had to take that line with Stevie, and you'll do me the justice of admitting that I backed you up; but when we're alone, do chuck all that. I'm very grateful to you for forking out—by the way I hope you noticed the nice little touch in the sum?"



present mood of bravado, and at the corner of Chancery Lane they parted.

"Mind," John warned him, "if you wish for any help from me you are to remain for the present at Ambles."

"My dear chap, I don't want to remain anywhere else; but I wish you could appreciate the way in which the dark and bloody deed was done, as one of your characters would say. You haven't uttered a word of congratulation. After all, it took some pluck, you know, and the signature was an absolutely perfect fake—perfect. The only thing that failed was my nerve afterwards. But I suppose I should be steadier another time."

John hurried away in a rage and walked up the Strand muttering:

"What *was* the name of that mahogany-planter? *Was* it Raikes or wasn't it? I must find his card."

It was not until he had posted the following letter that he recovered some of his wonted serenity.

36 Church Row,

Hampstead, N.W.

Nov. 28, 1910.

My dear Miss Hamilton,

*In case I am too shy to broach the subject at lunch on Wednesday I am writing to ask you beforehand if in your wildest dreams you have ever dreamt that you could be a private secretary. I have for a long time been wanting a secretary, and as you often spoke with interest of my work I am in hopes that the idea will not be distasteful to you. I should not have dared to ask you if you had not mentioned shorthand yesterday and if Mrs. Hamilton had not said something about your typewriting. This seems to indicate that at any rate you have considered the question of secretarial work. The fact of the matter is that in addition to my plays I am very much worried by family affairs, so much so that I am kept from my own work and really require not merely mechanical assistance, but also advice on many subjects on which a woman is competent to advise.*

*I gathered also from your mother's conversation that you yourself were sometimes harassed by family problems and I*

## Poor Relations

thought that perhaps you might welcome an excuse to from them for awhile.

My notions of the salary that one ought to offer secretary are extremely vague. Possibly our friend M would negotiate the business side, which to me as a always very unpleasant. I should of course accept wh. Merritt proposed without hesitation. My idea w would work with me every morning at Hampstead. I yet attempted dictation myself, but I feel that I coul a little practice. Then I thought you would lunch w that after lunch we could work on the materials—th that I should give you a list of things I wanted to k. . . would search for either in my own library or at Museum. Does this strike you as too heavy a tas. Miss Merritt will advise you on this matter too.

If Mrs. Hamilton is opposed to the idea, possi call upon her and explain personally my point of v meantime I am looking forward to our lunch and much that you will set my mind at rest by acceptin think I told you that I was working on a play with as the central figure. It is interesting, because I a not to fall into the temptation of introducing a f interest, which in my opinion spoilt Schiller's versi.

Yours sincer  
John

## Chapter Ten

WHEN after lunch on Wednesday afternoon John relinquished Miss Hamilton to the company of her friend Miss Merritt at Charing Cross Station, he was relinquishing a secretary from whom he had received an assurance that the very next morning she would be at his elbow, if he might so express himself. In his rosier moments he had never expected so swift a fulfilment of his plan, and he felt duly grateful to Miss Merritt, to whose powers of persuasion he ascribed the acceptance in spite of Mrs. Hamilton's usually only too effective method of counteracting any kind of independent action on her daughter's part. On the promenade deck of the *Murmania* Miss Merritt had impressed John with her resolute character; now she seemed to him positively Napoleonic, and he was more in awe of her than ever, so much so indeed that he completely failed to convey his sense of obligation to her good offices and could only beam at her like a benevolent character in a Dickens novel. Finally he did manage to stammer out his desire that she would charge herself with the financial side of the agreement, and was lost in silent wonder when she had no hesitation in suggesting terms based on the fact that Miss Hamilton had no previous experience as a secretary.

"Later on, if you're satisfied with her," she said, "you must increase her salary; but I will be no party to overpayment simply because she is personally sympathetic to you."

How well that was put, John thought. Personally sympathetic! How accurately it described his attitude toward Miss Hamilton. He took leave of the young women and walked up Villiers Street, cheered by the pleasant conviction that the flood of domestic worries which had threatened to destroy his peace of mind and overwhelm his productive power was at last definitely stayed.

"She's exactly what I require," he kept saying to himself exultantly. "And I think I may claim without unduly fl-

## *Poor Relations*

ing myself that the post I have offered her is exactly requires. From what that very nice girl Miss Merritt is evidently a question of asserting herself now or never—what a charming lack of self-consciousness she asks for a salary and even suggested the hours of work herself. Undoubtedly practical—very practical; but at the same time she has not got that almost painfully practical exterior of Miss Merritt, who must have broken in a large number of employers to acquire that tight set to her mouth. I shall be easy to manage, so working for me won't have an unbusinesslike appearance. To-morrow we are to choose a typewriter; and by the way, I must find a room she is to use for typing. The noise of a machine at speed would be as prejudicial to composition as Valse dancing. Yes, I must arrange with Mrs. Worfolk for a room."

John's faith in his good luck was confirmed by the discovery that Mrs. Worfolk had known his intended as a child.

"Her old nurse in fact!" he exclaimed joyfully. The melodramatic coincidence did not offend John's palate.

"No, sir, not her nurse. I never was not what you call a nurse proper. Well, I mean to say, though fond of children I seemed to take more somehow to myself, and so I never got beyond being a nurse that I gave myself up to rising as high as a housemaid until I married Mr. Worfolk. Perhaps you may have once passing the remark that I'd been in service in a family? Well, after I left them I took a situation as housemaid with a very nice family in the country. Then I came up to London for the season to Grosvenor. Then I met Mr. Worfolk who was a carpenter packing-cases for Mr. Hamilton who was your young man. Oh, I remember him well. There was a slight antipathy between Mr. Worfolk and I—well, not argument, but there was a very happy marriage, but a slight conversation whether he was to make cases for Chi-nese or Chinese knacks, and Mr. Worfolk was wrong."

"But were you in service with Mr. Hamilton? Did he live in Huntingdonshire?"

"No, no, sir. You're getting very confused, if you'll pardon the obsvation. Very confused, you're getting. This Mr. Hamilton was a customer of Mr. Worfolk and through him coming to superintend his Chi-nese valuables being packed I got to know his little girl—your secretary as is to be. Oh, I remember her perfectly. Why, I mended a hole in her stocking once. Right above the garter it was, and she was so fond of our Tom. Oh, but he *was* a beautiful mouser. I've heard many people say they never saw a finer cat nowhere."

"You have a splendid memory, Mrs. Worfolk."

"Yes, sir. I have got a good memory. Why, when I was a tiny tot I can remember my poor grandpa being took sudden with the colic and rolling about on the kitchen hearthrug, groaning, as you might say, in a agony of pain. Well, he died the same year as the Juke of Wellington, but though I was taken to the Juke's funeral by my poor mother, I've forgotten that. Well, one can't remember everything, and that's a fact; one little thing will stick and another little thing won't. Well, I mean to say, it's a good job anybody can't remember everything. I'm shaw there's enough trouble in the world as it is."

Mrs. Worfolk startled the new secretary when she presented herself at 36 Church Row next day by embracing her affectionately in the hall before she had explained the reason for such a demonstration. It soon transpired, however, that Miss Hamilton's memory was as good as Mrs. Worfolk's and that she had not forgotten those jolly visits to the carpenter long ago, nor even the big yellow tomcat. As for the master of the house, he raised his housekeeper's salary to show what importance he attached to a good memory.

For a day or two John felt shy of assigning much work to his secretary; but she soon protested that, if she was only given to type thirty to fifty lines of blank verse every other morning, she should resign her post on the ground that it was an undignified sinecure.

"What about dictating your letters? You made no point of my knowing shorthand."

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" John agreed.

## Poor Relations

Dictation made him very nervous at first ; but with practice he began to enjoy it, and ultimately it became a thing in the nature of a vice. He dictated immense letters to friends whose very existence he had forgotten years, the result of which abrupt revivals of intercourse shower of appeals to lend money to these companion youth. Yet this result did not discourage him from dictating for dictation's sake, and every night turned over to go to sleep he used to poke about in the heap of the past for more forgotten friends. As an incommoding himself with a host of unnecessary complications he became meticulously businesslike, and after having Miss Janet Bond for several weeks he began to wonder daily about the progress of the play, which notwithstanding his passion for dictation really was progressing at last he worked up the proprietress of the Parthenon to such a state of excitement that one morning she appeared at Church Row and made a dramatic entrance into the room when John, who had for the moment exhausted his friends, was dictating a letter to the *Times* about the value of some of the trees on Hampstead Heath.

"I've broken in upon your inspiration," boomed in tones that she usually reserved for her most intimate moments.

In vain did the author asseverate that he was not troubling her ; she rushed away without another word ; but she wrote him an ecstatic letter from her dressing-room telling him what it had meant to her and what it always would mean to think of his working like that for her.

"But we mustn't deride Janet Bond," said his secretary, who was looking contemptuously at her heaving caligraphy. "We must remember that she is a Joan of Arc."

"Yes, it's a pity, isn't it?" Miss Hamilton replied dryly.

"Oh, but won't you allow that she's a great deal more than a Joan of Arc?"

"I will indeed," she murmured with an emphasis.

Carried along upon his flood of correspondence he nevertheless managed to steer clear of his relations, and



frame of mind he was inclined to attribute his successful course like everything else that was prospering just now to the advent of Miss Hamilton. However, it was too much to expect that with his newly discovered talent he should resist dictating at any rate one epistolary sermon to his youngest brother, of whose arrival at Ambles he had been sharply notified by Hilda. This weighty address took up nearly a whole morning, and when it was finished John was disconcerted by Miss Hamilton's saying :

"You don't really want me to type all this out?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. But it seems to me that whatever he's done this won't make him repent. You don't mind my criticizing you?"

"I asked you to," he reminded her.

"Well, it seems to me a little false—a little, if I may say so, complacently wrathful. It's the sort of thing I seem to remember reading and laughing at in old-fashioned books. Of course, I'll type it out at once if you insist; but it's already after twelve o'clock, and we have to go over the material for the third act. I can't somehow fit in what you've just been dictating with what you were telling me yesterday about the scene between Gilles de Rais and Joan. I'm so afraid that you'll make Joan preach, and of course she mustn't preach, must she?"

"All right," conceded John, trying not to appear mortified.

"If you think it isn't worth sending, I won't send it."

He fancied that she would be moved by his sensitiveness to her judgment; but without a tremor she tore the pages out of her shorthand book and threw them into the waste-paper basket. John stared at the ruthless young woman in dismay.

"Didn't you mean me to take you at your word?" she asked severely.

He was not altogether sure that he had, but he lacked the courage to tell her so and checked an impulse to rescue his stillborn sermon from the grave.

"Though I don't quite like the idea of leaving my brother at Ambles with nothing to occupy his energies," John went on meditatively, "I'm doubtful of the prudence of exposing him to the temptations of idleness."



in their own way, at any rate until the rough draft of the third act was finished, which under present favourable conditions might easily happen before Christmas. His secretary was always careful not to worry him with her own domestic bothers, though he knew by the way she had once or twice referred to her mother that she was having her own hard fight at home. He had once proposed calling upon the old lady; but Doris had quickly squashed the suggestion. John liked to think about Mrs. Hamilton, because through some obscure process of logic it gave him an excuse to think about her daughter as Doris. In other connections he thought of her formally as Miss Hamilton, and often told himself how lucky it was that so charming and accomplished a young woman should be so obviously indifferent to—well, not exactly to himself, but surely he might allege to anything except himself as a romantic playwright.

Meanwhile, the play itself marched on with apparent smoothness, until one morning John dictated the following letter to his star:

*My dear Miss Bond,*

*Much against my will I have come to the conclusion that without a human love interest a play about Joan of Arc is impossible. You will be surprised by my abrupt change of front, and you will smile to yourself when you remember how earnestly I argued against your suggestion that I might ultimately be compelled to introduce a human love interest. The fact of the matter is that now I have arrived at the third act I find patriotism too abstract an emotion for the stage. As you know, my idea was to make Joan so much positively enamoured of her country that the ordinary love interest would be superseded. I shall continue to keep Joan herself heart free; but I do think that it would be effective to have at any rate two people in love with her. My notion is to introduce a devoted young peasant who will follow her from her native village first to the court at Chinon, and so on right through the play until the last fatal scene in the market place at Rouen. I'm sure such a simple lover could be made very moving, and the contrast would be valuable; moreover, it strikes me as a perfectly natural situation. Further, I propose that Gilles de Rais should*

## Poor Relations

not only be in love with her, but that he should actually his love, and that she should for a brief moment be return it, finally spurning him as a temptation of the thereby reducing him to such a state of despair that into the horrible practices for which he was finally death. Let me know your opinion soon, because I am moment working on the third act.

Yours very sincerely

John T.

To which Miss Bond replied by telegram:

Complete confidence in you and think suggestion there should be exit speech of renunciation for J down curtain of third act

J.

"You agree with these suggestions?" John's secretary.

"Like Miss Bond I have complete confidence," she replied.

He looked at her earnestly to see if she was laughing and put down his pen.

"Do you know that in some ways you are very like Joan?"

It was a habit of John's, who had a brain like to perceive historical resemblances that were denied to ordinary vision. Generally he discovered these reincarnations past in his own personality. While he was in *Babylon* he actually fretted himself for a time at the similarity between his own character and Nero's and sometimes used to wonder if he was putting himself into his portrayal of that dim potentate. In his composition of *Lucretia* he was so profoundly affected that Cæsar Borgia was simply John Touchwood in a more passionate period and a more picturesque one. As the critics pointed out, he presented the

of him that would never have been recognized by Machiavelli. Yet, even when Harold was being most unpleasant or when Viola and Bertram were deafening his household, John could not bring himself to believe that he and Gilles de Rais, who was proved to have tortured over three hundred children to death, had many similar traits; nor was he willing to admit more than a most superficial likeness to the feeble Dauphin Charles. In fact at one time he was so much discouraged by his inability to adumbrate himself in any of his personages that he began to regret his choice of Joan of Arc and to wish that he had persevered in his intention to write a play about Sir Walter Raleigh with whom, allowing for the sundering years, he felt he had more in common than with any other historical figure. Therefore he was relieved to discover this resemblance between his heroine and his secretary, in whom he was beginning to take nearly as much interest as in himself:

"Do you mean outwardly?" asked Miss Hamilton, looking at an engraving of the bust from the church of St. Maurice, Orleans. "If so, I hope her complexion wasn't quite as scaly as that."

"No, I meant in character."

"I suppose a private secretary ought not to say 'what nonsense' to her employer, but really what else can I say? You might as well compare Ida Merritt to Joan of Arc; in fact she really is rather like my conception of her."

"I'm sorry you find the comparison so far-fetched," John said huffily. "It wasn't intended to be uncomplimentary."

"Have you decided to introduce those wolves in the first act, because I think I ought to begin making enquiries about suitable dogs?"

When Miss Hamilton rushed away from the personal this, John used to regret that he had changed their relations from one of friendship to one of business. Although he admitted practicalness, he realized that it was possible to be too practical and he sighed sometimes for the tone that his unknown admirer took when they wrote to him about his work. Only morning he had received a letter from one of these, he had tossed across the table for his secretary's perusal he dictated a graceful reply.



out of reach alike of the still sad music and the hurdy-gurdies of humanity, so that these letters from unknown men and women, were they never so foolish, titillated his vanity, which he called 'appealing to his imagination.'

"One must try to put oneself in the writer's place," he had urged reproachfully.

"Um—yes, but I can't help thinking of Mrs. Enid Foster living in those wonderful old cities. Her household will crash like Babylon if she isn't careful, and her family will be reduced to eating grass like Nebuchadnezzar, if the greengrocer's book is neglected any longer."

"You won't allow the suburbs to be touched by poetry?"

John had tried to convey in his tone that Miss Hamilton in criticizing the enthusiasm of Mrs. Foster was depreciating his own work. But she had seemed quite unconscious of having rather offended him and had taken down his answer without excusing herself. Now when in a spirit that was truly forgiving he had actually compared her to his beloved heroine, she had scoffed at him as if he was a kind of Mrs. Foster himself.

"You're very matter-of-fact," he muttered.

"Isn't that a rather desirable quality in a secretary?"

"Yes, but I think you might have waited to hear why you reminded me of Joan of Arc before you began talking about those confounded wolves, which by the way I have decided to cut out."

"Don't cut out a good effect just because you're annoyed with me," she advised.

"Oh no, there are other reasons," said John loftily. "It is possible that in an opening tableau the audience may not appreciate that they are wolves, and if they think they're a lot of stray dogs, the effect will go for nothing. It was merely a passing idea, and I have discarded it."

Miss Hamilton left him to go and type out the morning's correspondence, and John settled down to a speech by the IV on the subject of perpetual celibacy: he wrote a very good

"She may laugh at me," said the author to himself, 'she is like Joan—extraordinarily like. Why, I can hear making this very speech.'

Miss Hamilton might sometimes profane John's





"Well, of course you get through much more in the day now," she agreed.

John would have liked a less practical response, but he made the best of it.

"I've got so much wrapped up in the play," he said, "that I'm wondering now if I shall be able to tear myself away from London for Christmas. I dread the idea of a complete break—especially with the most interesting portion just coming along. I think I must ask you to take your holiday later in the year, if you don't mind."

He had got it out, and if he could have patted himself on the back without appearing ridiculous in a public thoroughfare he would have done so. His manner might have sounded brusque, but John was sure that the least suggestion of any other attitude except that of an employer compelled against his will to seem inconsiderate would have been fatal.

"That would mean leaving my mother alone," said Miss Hamilton doubtfully.

John looked sympathetic but firm when he agreed with her.

"She would understand that literary work takes no account of the church calendar," he pointed out. "After all, what is Christmas?"

"Unfortunately my mother is already very much offended with me for working with you at all. Oh well, bother relations!" she exclaimed vehemently. "I'm going to be selfish in future. All right, if you insist I must obey—or lose my job, eh?"

"I might have to engage a *locum tenens*. You see, not that I've got into the habit of dictating my letters and relying upon somebody else to keep my references in order and

"Yes, yes," she interrupted. "I quite see that it would put you to great inconvenience if I cried off. All the same, I can't help being worried by the notion of leaving mother on Christmas Day itself. Why shouldn't I join you day after?"

"The very thing," John decided. "I will leave London Christmas Eve, and you shall come down on Boxing Day. I should travel in the morning, if I were you. It's

## Poor Relations

unpleasant, travelling in the evening on a *Ban-Hullo*, here we are! This walk has given me an appetite, and I do feel that we've made a splendid fourth act, don't you?"

"The fourth act?" repeated his secretary. "me that most of the time you were talking about of women in modern life."

John laughed gaily.

"Ah, I see you haven't even yet absolutely got the method of work. I was thinking all the while of Joan to her accusers. I can assure you that all my remarks are entirely relevant to what I had in my head. That's my atmosphere. I told you that you reminded me of Joan, but you wouldn't believe me. In doublet and hose *be* Joan."

"Should I? I think I should look more like Dick Whittington in a touring pantomime. My legs are too thin for that."

"By the way, I wonder if Janet Bond has got married," said John pensively.

It was charming to be able to talk about women in this way without there being the slightest suggestion that he was doing so; yet, somehow the least promising topics were rendered so by the company of Miss Hamilton, and most of them, by the time they were over, had acquired a new and absorbing interest. John had entered a vow on the first day his secretary came that he would watch carefully for the least signs of rosyfying her and renew this vow every morning before his glass; but he found it sometimes difficult not to attribute to her all sorts of fascinations, as on those occasions when he would find her working later than usual in the afternoon and would have been persuaded to stay for tea, for which was a point of getting home to please her mother who attached great importance. John was convinced that even his mother would forgive him for thinking that in all England there was not a more competent, a more charming, a more—himself—pull himself up guiltily at about the third comparison—stifle his fancies in the particularly—*as cake*—*Worfolk* always seemed to provide one—*what*—*stayed to tea.*

"Well, of course you get through much more in the day now," she agreed.

John would have liked a less practical response, but he made the best of it.

"I've got so much wrapped up in the play," he said, "that I'm wondering now if I shall be able to tear myself away from London for Christmas. I dread the idea of a complete break—especially with the most interesting portion just coming along. I think I must ask you to take your holiday later in the year, if you don't mind."

He had got it out, and if he could have patted himself on the back without appearing ridiculous in a public thoroughfare he would have done so. His manner might have sounded brusque, but John was sure that the least suggestion of any other attitude except that of an employer compelled against his will to seem inconsiderate would have been fatal.

"That would mean leaving my mother alone," said Miss Hamilton doubtfully.

John looked sympathetic but firm when he agreed with her.

"She would understand that literary work takes no account of the church calendar," he pointed out. "After all, what is Christmas?"

"Unfortunately my mother is already very much offended with me for working with you at all. Oh well, bother relations!" she exclaimed vehemently. "I'm going to be selfish in future. All right, if you insist I must obey—or lose my job, eh?"

"I might have to engage a locum tenens. You see, now that I've got into the habit of dictating my letters and rely upon somebody else to keep my references in order and

"Yes, yes," she interrupted. "I quite see that it would put you to great inconvenience if I cried off. All the same can't help being worried by the notion of leaving mother on Christmas Day itself. Why shouldn't I join you on day after?"

"The very thing," John decided. "I will leave London Christmas Eve, and you shall come down on Boxing Day. I should travel in the morning, if I were you. It's a

*the day after Christmas*

## Poor Relations

unpleasant, travelling in the evening on a Ban' Hullo, here we are ! This walk has given me a t appetite, and I do feel that we've made a splendid the fourth act, don't you ? ”

“ The fourth act ? ” repeated his secretary. “ I me that most of the time you were talking about t of women in modern life.”

John laughed gaily.

“ Ah, I see you haven't even yet absolutely g method of work. I was thinking all the while of J to her accusers. I can assure you that all my re. entirely relevant to what I had in my head. That' get my atmosphere. I told you that you reminded but you wouldn't believe me. In doublet and hose bc Joan.”

“ Should I ? I think I should look more like Dick W in a touring pantomime. My legs are too thin for ti

“ By the way, I wonder if Janet Bond has ge said John pensively.

It was charming to be able to talk about women this without there being the slightest suggestion th any ; yet, somehow the least promising topics were re by the company of Miss Hamilton, and most of the oldest, acquired a new and absorbing interest. John tered a vow on the first day his secretary came th watch carefully for the least signs of rosifying her renewed this vow every morning before his glass ; sometimes difficult not to attribute to her all sorts of fascinations, as on those occasions when he would her working later than usual in the afternoon and would have been persuaded to stay for tea, for whic a point of getting home to please her mother wh grand importance. John was convinced that c would forgive him for thinking that in all Englan not a more competent, a more charming, a more pull himself up guiltily at about the third comp stifle his fancies in the particularly delicious cak Norfolk always seemed to provide on the days whe tary stayed to tea.

It was on one of these rosified afternoons full of candlelight and firelight and the warmed scent of hyacinths that Miss Hamilton rallied John about his exaggerated dread of his relations.

"For I've been working with you now for nearly three weeks, and you've not been bothered by them once," she declared.

"My name! My name!" he cried. "Touchwood!"

"I begin to think it's nothing but an affectation," she persisted. "*You're* not pestered by charitable uncles who want to boast of what they've done for their poor brother's only daughter. *You're* not made to feel that you've wrecked your mother's old age by earning your own living."

"Yes, they have been quiet recently," he admitted. "But there was such a terrible outbreak of Family Influenza just before you came that some sort of prostration for a time was inevitable. I hope you don't expect my brother Hugh to commit a forgery every week. Besides, that excellent suggestion of yours about preparing Ambles for Christmas has kept him busy, and probably all the rest of them down there too. But it's odd you should raise the subject, because I was going to propose your having supper here some Sunday soon and inviting my eldest brother and his wife to meet you."

"To-morrow is the last Sunday before Christmas. The Sunday after is Christmas Day."

"Is it really? Then I must dictate an invitation for to-morrow, and I must begin to see about presents on Monday. By Jove, how time has flown!"

"After all, what is Christmas?" she laughed.

"Oh, you must expect children to be excited about it," John murmured. "I don't like to disappoint *them*. But no idea Christmas was on top of us like this. You'll help with my shopping next week? I hope to goodness *she* won't come and bother me. She'll be getting back to to-morrow. It's really extraordinary, the way the *time* passed."

John dictated an urgent invitation to James and supped with him the following evening, and since it was

## *Poor Relations*

to let them know by post he decided to see Miss Hamilton far as the tube and leave the note in person at Hill.

James arrived for supper in a most truculent mood, being aggravated by his brother's burgundy, of which a good deal referring to it all the while as poison. John's annoyance, embroiled him half-way through an argument with Miss Hamilton on the subject of intelligence.

"Women are not intelligent," he shouted. "Thing intelligence they sometimes appear to exhibit of their numerous sexual allurements. A woman has her nerves, reasons with her emotions, and speculates on sensations."

"Rubbish," said Miss Hamilton emphatically.

"Now, Jimmie dear," his wife put in, "you'll get indigestion if you get excited while you're eatin'."

"I shall have indigestion anyway," growled he. "My liver will be like dough to-morrow after this I ought to drink a light moselle."

"Well, you can have moselle," John began.

"I loathe moselle. I'd as soon drink syrup," James bellowed.

"All right, you shall have syrup of squills next time."

"Oh, Johnnie," Beatrice interposed with a wide smile. "Jimmie's only joking. He doesn't really loathe squills."

"For heaven's sake don't try to analyze my tongue," James said to his wife.

John threw a glance at Miss Hamilton, which was expressive of "What did I tell you?" But she was in no signal and only intent upon attacking James on his sex.

"Women have not the same kind of intelligence," she began, "because it is denied to them by their constitution. But they have, I insist, a supplementary intelligence without which the great masculine minds would be ineffective as convulsions of nature. Women are coral-polyps. . . ."

"Bravo!" John cried. "A capital comparison."

"An absurd comparison!" James contradicted. "A ludicrous comparison! Woman is purely individualistic. The moment she begins to take up with communal effort, she tends to become sterile."

"Do get on with your supper, dear," urged Beatrice, who had only understood the last word and was anxious not 'to be made to feel small,' as she would have put it, in front of an unmarried woman.

John perceived her mortification and jumped through the argument as a clown through a paper-hoop.

"Remember I'm expecting you both at Ambles on Christmas Eve," he said boisterously. "We're going to have a real old-fashioned Christmas party."

James forgot all about women in his indignation; but before he could express his opinion Beatrice held up another paper-hoop for the distraction of the audience.

"I'm simply longin' for the country," she declared. "Christmas with a lot of children is the nicest thing I know."

John went through this hoop with aplomb and refused to be unseated by his brother.

"James will enjoy it more than any of us," he chuckled.

"What!" shouted the critic. "I'd sooner be wrecked on a desert island with nothing to read but a sixpenny edition of *The Christmas Carol*. Ugh!"

John looked at Miss Hamilton again, and this time his appeal was not unheeded; she said no more about women and let James rail on at sentimental festivities, which by the time he had finished with them looked as irreparable as the remains the tippy-cake. There seemed no reason amid the universal collapse of tradition to conserve the habit of letting the ladies retire after dinner. As there was no drawing-room in bachelor household, it would have been more comfortable to smoke upstairs in the library; but James returned to Fie after demolishing Dickens and protested against being to hurry over his port; so his host had to watch Beatrice escort Miss Hamilton from the dining-room, with considerable resentment at what he thought was her unjustifiably proper manner.

"As my secretary," he felt, "Miss Hamilton is me."

## Poor Relations

in my house than Beatrice is. I suppose, though, everything else I have my relations are going to take of her now."

"Where did you pick up your lady-help?" John asked when he and his brother were left alone with the visitor.

"If you're alluding to Miss Hamilton," John said, "I met her on board the *Murmania*, crossing the Atlantic."

"I never heard any good come of travelling acquaintance. She has a good complexion; I suppose she took you for not being sea-sick. Beware of women with good complexions who aren't sea-sick, Johnnie. They always flirt."

"Are you supposed to be warning me against my secretary?"

"Any woman who finds herself at a man's elbow is dangerous. Nurses of course are the most notoriously dangerous. A secretary who isn't sea-sick is nearly as bad."

"Thanks very much for your brotherly concern," John said sarcastically. "You will be relieved to hear that the relationship between Miss Hamilton and myself is a purely business one and likely to remain so."

"Platonism was never practical," James answered snortingly. "It was the most unpractical system ever invented."

"Fortunately Miss Hamilton is sufficiently interested in her work and in mine not to bother her head about the details of the affections."

James was irritating when he was criticizing contemporary literature; but his views of modern life were infuriated by the visitor.

"I'm not accusing your young woman—how old is she, the way? About twenty-nine I should guess. That's a dangerous age, Johnnie. However, as I say, I'm not interested in her of designs upon you. But a man who writes and plays that you do is capable of any extravagance, and you are much too old by now to be thinking about marriage."

"I don't happen to be thinking about marriage," John retorted. "But I refuse to accept your dictum about age. I consider that the effects of age have been very much exaggerated by the young. You cannot call a man of forty old."

"You look much more than forty-two. However, you write plays like yours without exposing oneself to the emotional wear and tear. No, no, you're not!"



mistake in introducing a woman into the house. Believe me, Johnnie, I'm speaking for your good. If I hadn't married, I might have preserved my illusions about women and compounded just as profitable a dose of *dramatic nux vomica* as yourself."

"What do you mean by a dose of *dramatic nux vomica*?"

"That's my name for the sort of plays you write, which unduly accelerate the action of the heart and make a sane person retch. However, don't take my remarks in ill part. I was simply commenting on the danger of letting a good-looking young woman make herself indispensable."

"I'm glad you allow her good looks," John said witheringly. "Anyone who was listening to our conversation would get the impression that she was as ugly and voracious as a harpy."

"Yes, yes. She's quite good-looking. Very nice ankles."

"I haven't noticed her ankles," John said austere.

"You will though," his brother replied with an encouraging laugh. "By the way, what's that rascal Hugh been doing? I hear you've replanted him in the bosom of the family. Isn't Hugh rather too real for one of your Christmas parties?"

John after some hesitation had decided not to tell any of the others the details of Hugh's misdemeanour; he had even denied himself the pleasure of holding him up to George as a warning; hence the renewal of his interest in Hugh had struck the family as a mere piece of sentimentality.

"Crutchley didn't seem to believe he'd ever make much of architecture," he explained to James. "And I'm thinking of helping him to establish himself in British Honduras."

"Bah! For less than he'll cost you in British Honduras you could establish me as the editor of a new critical weekly," James grunted.

"There is still time for Hugh to make something of life," John replied. He had not had the slightest intention of trying to score off his eldest brother by this remark, he was shocked to see what a spasm of ill will twisted his face.

"I suppose your young woman is responsible for this solicitude for Hugh's career? I suppose it's she who persuaded you that he has possibilities? You take care,

## *Poor Relations*

You can't manipulate the villain in life as you stage."

Now Miss Hamilton, though she had not met shown just enough interest in Hugh to give these sting; and John must have been obviously taken the critic at once recovered his good humour and joining the ladies upstairs. Beatrice was sitting by her husband's absence had allowed her to begin the of an unusually good dinner in peace, and the smile her countenance made her look more than ever like photograph of the early 'nineties. Miss Hamilton other hand seemed bored, and very soon she declared must go home lest her mother should be anxious.

"Oh, you have a mother?" James observed in such that John thought it was the most offensive remark of he had heard him make that evening. He hoped Hamilton would not abandon him after this first with his relations, and he tried to ascertain her intention while she was putting on her things in the hall.

"I'm afraid you've had a very dull evening," he apologized. "I hope my sister-in-law wasn't more than usual. What did she talk about?"

"She was warning me—no, I won't be malicious explaining to me the difficulties of an author's wife

"Yes, poor thing, I'm afraid my brother must be trying to live with. I hope you were sympathetic?"

"So sympathetic," Miss Hamilton replied with a glance, "that I told her I was never likely to experiment. Good night, Mr. Touchwood. To be usual."

She hurried down the steps and was gone before he uttered a word.

"I don't think she need have said that," he said to himself on his way back to the library. "I've been trying; but I really don't think I have said that to me. It wasn't worth repeating that stupid remark. That's the way things acquire importance."

With John's entrance the conversation recommenced

Hamilton ; but though it was nearly all implied criticism of his new secretary, he had no desire to change the topic. She was much more interesting than the weekly bills at Hill Road, and he listened without contradiction to his brother's qualms about her experience and his sister-in-law's regrets for her lack of it.

"However," said John to his reflection when he was undressing, "they've got to make the best of her, even if they all think the worse. And the beauty of it is that they can't occupy her as they can occupy a house. I must see about getting Hugh off to the Colonies soon. If I don't find out about British Honduras, he can always go to Canada or Australia. It isn't good for him to hang about in England."

## Chapter Eleven

WHETHER it was due to the Christmas of his new house or merely to a desire for a romantic hospitality in the face of his brother, it is certain that John had never before gone so benevolently mad as during the week that Christmas in the year 1910. Mindful of that afternoon in Galton when he had tried to procure for Frida gifts of such American appearance as might escape negligence he was determined not to expose his second time to juvenile criticism, and in the selection he pandered to every idiosyncrasy he had so far observed in his nephews and nieces. Thus, for Bertram he bought a stamp album, several sheets of tropical stamps, a set of representatives of every species in the great genus, a set of expensive and realistic masks, and a modern outfit. For Viola he filled a trunk with remnants of old dresses and all kinds of stuffs, placing on top two pairs of castanets and the most professional tambourine he could find, and in order that nature might not be utterly subordinated he bought her a very large doll rather older in appearance than Viola herself, in fact almost marriageable. For George, in order of obliterating the disappointment of those china dolls, he chose for Frida a completely furnished dolls'-house with garden and stables attached, so grand a house indeed that he divided all the rooms into one she could with slight inconvenience live in it herself; this residence he populated with dolls, lady-dolls, servant-dolls, nurse-dolls, baby-dolls, carriages, and motors; nor did he omit to provide a toy gun and a toy soldier's shop for the vicinity. For Harold he bought a collector's equipment, a vacuum pistol, a set of slides, a microscope, and at the last moment a juvenile model of an air pump with air pumps and all accessories, which was perfectly safe, though the wicked uncle wondered what it was for.

"I don't want a mere toy for the bath-room,"

"Quite so, sir," the shopman assented with a bow. "This is guaranteed for any ordinary village pond or small stream."

For his grown up relations John bought the kind of presents that one always does buy for grown up relations, the kind of presents that look very ornamental on the counter, seem very useful when the shopman explains what they are for, puzzle the recipient and the donor when the shopman is no longer there, and lie about the house on small tables for the rest of the year. In the general odour of Russia leather that clung to his benefactions John hoped that Miss Hamilton would not consider too remarkable the attaché's case that he intended to give her, nor amid the universal dazzle of silver object to the few little luxuries of the writing-desk with which he had enhanced it. Then there were the presents for the servants to choose, and he counted much on Miss Hamilton's enabling him to introduce into these an utilitarian note that for two or three seasons had been missing from his donations, which to an outsider might have seemed more like lures of the flesh than sober testimonials to service. He also counted upon her to persuade Mrs. Worfolk to accompany Maud down to Ambles: Elsa was to be left in Church Row with permission to invite to dinner the policeman to whom she was betrothed and various friends and relations of the two families.

When the presents were settled John proceeded to lay in a store of eatables and drinkables, in the course of which enterprise he was continually saying :

"I've forgotten for the moment what I want next, but meanwhile you'd better give me another box of Elvas plums."

"Another drum? Yes, sir," the shopman would reply, licking his pencil in a way that was at once obsequious and pedantic, though it was not intended to suggest more than perfect efficiency.

When the hall and the adjacent rooms at 36 Church Row had been turned into rolling dunes of brown paper, John rushed about London in a last phrenzy of unbridled acquisitiveness to secure plenty of amusement for the children. To this end he obtained a few well known and well tried favourites like the kinetoscope and the magic lantern, and a number of

## *Poor Relations*

experimental diversions which would have required an engineer or renowned scientist to demonstrate. Finally he bargained for the wardrobe of a Santa Claus dignified perambulations round the Christmas Bazaar. The noted emporium had attracted his fancy on account of a number of children who followed him everywhere, laughing and screaming with delight. It was not until he had made his purchase that he discovered it was not the extensive Santa Claus which had charmed his little satellites, but the free distribution of bags of coagulated jujubes.

"I expect I'd better get the Christmas tree in the said John waist-deep in the still rising drift of powder, I daresay the Galton shops keep those silver and magenta you hang on Christmas trees, and I ought to consult the local tradesmen."

"If you have any local shopping to do I'm sure you will be wise to go down to-day," Miss Hamilton suggested. "Besides, Mrs. Worfolk won't want to arrive a minute."

"No, indeed I shan't, miss," said the housekeeper. "I mean to say, I don't think we ever shall arrive, no more much longer. We shall require a performing elephant to carry all these parcels, as it is."

"My idea was to go down in the last train on Christmas Eve," John argued. "I like the old-fashioned style, you know?"

"Yes, old-fashioned's the word," Mrs. Worfolk replied. "Why, who's to get the house ready if we all go to London on Christmas Eve? And if I go, sir, you must come. You know how quick Mrs. Curtis always is to snap at me. If I had my own way I wouldn't go within a mile of the country, that's a sure thing."

John began to be afraid that his housekeeper was on her word, and he surrendered to the notion of staying at home that afternoon.

"I say, what is this parcel like a long drain-pipe?" asked John in a final effort to detain Miss Hamilton, who was about to make her farewells and leave him to his packing.

"Ah, it would take some finding out," Mrs. Worfolk replied.

posed. "I've never seen so many shapes and sizes of parcels in all my life."

"They must have made a mistake," said John. "I don't remember buying anything so tubular as this."

He pulled away some of the paper wrapping to see what was inside.

"Ah, of course! They're two or three boxes of Elvas plums I ordered. But please don't go, Miss Hamilton," he protested.

"I am relying upon you to get the tickets at Waterloo."

In spite of a strenuous scene at the station, in the course of which John's attempts to propitiate Mrs. Worfolk led to one of the porters referring to her as his mother, they managed to catch the five o'clock train to Wrotesford; after earnestly assuring his secretary that he should be perfectly ready to begin work again on *Joan of Arc* the day after her arrival and begging her on no account to let herself be deterred from travelling on the morning of Boxing Day, John sank back into the pleasant dreams that haunt a warm first-class smoking compartment when it is raining hard outside in the darkness of a December night.

"We shall have a green Christmas this year," observed one of his fellow-travellers.

"Very green," John assented with enthusiasm, only realizing as he spoke that the superlative must sound absurd to anyone who was unaware of his thoughts and hiding his embarrassment in the *Westminster Gazette*, which in the circumstances was the best newspaper he could have chosen.

John was surprised and depressed when the train arrived at Wrotesford to find that the member of the Ambles party who had elected to meet him was Hilda; and there was a long argument on the platform who should drive in the dogcart who should drive in the fly. John did not want to ride on backseat of the dogcart, which he would have to do undrove himself, a prospect that did not attract him. He saw how impatiently the mare was dancing about through extreme lateness of the train. Hilda objected to driving his housekeeper in the fly, and in the end John was co to let Maud and Mrs. Worfolk occupy the dogcart, and Hilda toiled along the wet lanes in the fly. It was

## Poor Relations

to leave the greater portion of the luggage to be fetched in the morning, but even so it was after eight o'clock before they were away from the station, and John when he found himself immured with Hilda in the musty interior of the train was inclined to prophesy a blue Christmas this year. Hilda, with, Hilda would try to explain the system she had adopted in allotting the various bedrooms to accommodate the party that was expected at Ambles. It was bad enough as she confined herself to a verbal commentary; but when she produced a map of the house evidently made by her in the idle evening and to illuminate her dispositions with the most of John's matches, it became exasperating. John was already fatigued by the puzzle of fitting into a room four pieces, one of which might not move to the south, two of the remaining pieces, and another of which might move backward.

"I leave it entirely to you," he declared, introducing into the intellectual torment of chess some of the irresponsibleness of bridge. "You mustn't set me to chess problems in a jolting fly before dinner."

"Chess!" Hilda sniffed with a shiver. "Draughts would be a better name."

She did not often make jokes; before John had recovered sufficiently from his surprise to congratulate her on her laugh, she was off again upon her querulous and uninteresting narration of the family news.

"If everything *had* been left to me, I might have managed but Hugh's interference apparently authorized by the family all my poor little arrangements. I need hardly say that I was so delighted to have her favourite at home with her that she has done everything since he arrived to encourage his importance. It's Hughie this and Hughie that, and I'm quite sick of the sound of his name. And he's very vexatious poor little Harold. Apart from being very coarse and impudent in front of him, he is sometimes quite brutal. Only the other day he shot him in the upper part of the leg with a bullet from the poor little man's own air-gun."

John did laugh this time, and shouted 'Merry Christmas' to a passing wagon.



"I daresay it sounds very funny to you. But it made Harold cry."

"Come, come, Hilda, it's just as well he should learn the potentialities of his own instrument. He'll sympathize with the birds now."

"Birds," she scoffed. "Fancy comparing Harold with a bird!"

"It is rather unfair," John agreed.

"However, you won't be so ready to take Hugh's part when you see what he's been doing at Ambles."

"Why, what has he been doing?"

"Oh, never mind. I'd rather you judged for yourself," said Hilda darkly. "Of course, I don't know what Hugh has been up to in London that you've had to send him down to Hampshire. I always used to hear you vow that you would have nothing more to do with him. But I know that successful people are allowed to change their minds more often than the rest of us. I know success justifies everything. And it isn't as if Hugh was grateful for your kindness. I can assure you that he criticizes everything you do. Any stranger who heard him talking about your plays would think that they were a kind of disgrace to the family. As for Laurence, he encourages him, not because he likes him, but because Hugh fills him up with stories about the stage. Though I think that a clergyman who has got into such a muddle with his Bishop would do better not to make himself so conspicuous. The whole neighbourhood is talking about him."

"What is Laurence's latest?"

"Why, stalking about in a black cloak with his hair hanging down over his collar, stopping people in quiet lanes and reciting Shakespeare to them. It's not to be wondered at if half the county is talking about his behaviour and saying that he was turned out of Newton Candover for being drunk when the Bishop took a confirmation, and *some* even say that he kept a ballet-girl at the vicarage. But do you think that Edith objects? Oh no! All that Laurence does must be right, because it's Laurence. She prays for him to get back his belief in the Church of England, though who's going to offer him another living I'm sure I don't know, so she might just as well spare

## *Poor Relations*

her knees. And when she's not praying for him, him. She actually came out of her room the with her finger up to her lips, because Laurence disturbed at that moment. I need hardly tell , attention and went on saying what I had to s<sup>a</sup> about the disgraceful way he'd let the pears get

"It's a pity you didn't succeed in waking th of Laurence," John chuckled.

"It's all very well for you to laugh, John, ' see the way that Edith is bringing up Frida ! her into a regular little molly-coddle. I'm , does his best to put some life into the child, b<sup>u</sup> twitches whenever he comes near her. I to wasn't to be wondered at if Harold did teas<sup>e</sup> She encourages him to tease her by her affec<sup>t</sup> think that Frida was quite a nice little girl wh occasionally, but she doesn't improve on acq<sup>u</sup> ever, I blame her mother more than I do ' doesn't even make the child take her cod-<sup>e</sup> whereas Harold laps his up like a little Tro

"I daresay it sounds very funny to you. But it made Harold cry."

"Come, come, Hilda, it's just as well he should learn the potentialities of his own instrument. He'll sympathize with the birds now."

"Birds," she scoffed. "Fancy comparing Harold with a bird!"

"It is rather unfair," John agreed.

"However, you won't be so ready to take Hugh's part when you see what he's been doing at Ambles."

"Why, what has he been doing?"

"Oh, never mind. I'd rather you judged for yourself," said Hilda darkly. "Of course, I don't know what Hugh has been up to in London that you've had to send him down to Hampshire. I always used to hear you vow that you would have nothing more to do with him. But I know that successful people are allowed to change their minds more often than the rest of us. I know success justifies everything. And it isn't as if Hugh was grateful for your kindness. I can assure you that he criticizes everything you do. Any stranger who heard him talking about your plays would think that they were a kind of disgrace to the family. As for Laurence, he encourages him, not because he likes him, but because Hugh fills him up with stories about the stage. Though I think that a clergyman who has got into such a muddle with his Bishop would do better not to make himself so conspicuous. The whole neighbourhood is talking about him."

"What is Laurence's latest?"

"Why, strolling about in a black cloak with his hair hanging down over his collar, stopping people in quiet lanes and reciting Shakespeare to them. It's not to be wondered at if half the county is talking about his behaviour and saying that he has turned out of Newton Candover for being drunk when the Bishop took a confirmation, and some even say that he seduced a ballet-girl at the vicarage. But do you think that Edith will? Oh no! All that Laurence does must be right, like Laurence. She prays for him to get back his belief in the Church of England, though who's going to offer him a living I'm sure I don't know, so she might just as

## *Poor Relations*

her knees. And when she's not praying for him, she prays for him. She actually came out of her room the other day with her finger up to her lips, because Laurence was so disturbed at that moment. I need hardly tell you of my attention and went on saying what I had to say about the disgraceful way he'd let the pears get eaten.

"It's a pity you didn't succeed in waking them up for Laurence," John chuckled.

"It's all very well for you to laugh, John, but you don't see the way that Edith is bringing up Frida! She's turning her into a regular little molly-coddle. I'm sure Laurence does his best to put some life into the child, but she shivers and twitches whenever he comes near her. I told you she wasn't to be wondered at if Harold did tease her. She encourages him to tease her by her affectation. I don't think that Frida was quite a nice little girl when I was a boy. She occasionally, but she doesn't improve on acquaintance. I blame her mother more than I do her. She doesn't even make the child take her cod-liver oil, whereas Harold laps his up like a little Trojan."

"Never mind," said John soothingly. "I'm sure you'll all feel more cheerful after Christmas. And now, good-bye, mind, I'm afraid I must keep quiet for the rest of the day. I've got a scene to think about."

The author turned up the collar of his coat and hid his face in the deepest corner while Hilda chewed her veil in indignation until the mellow voice of Laurence, waving up a statuesque pose of welcome by the gate, broke the silence of the fly.

"Ah, John, my dear fellow, we are all delighted. The rain has stopped."

If Laurence had still been on good terms with John might have thought from his manner that he had really arranged this break in the weather.

"Is Harold there?" asked Hilda sharply.

"Here I am, mother; I've just caught a B. I won't go into my poison-bottle."

"And what is a Buff-tip?" enquired Laurence in patronizing ignorance.

"Oh, it's a pretty common moth."

"Harold darling, don't bother about moths or butterflies to-night. Come and say how d'ye do to dear Uncle John."

"I've dropped the cork of my poison-bottle. Look out, Frida, bother you, I say, you'll tread on it."

The combined scents of cyanide of potassium and hot metal from Harold's bull's-eye lantern were heavy upon the moist air; when the cork was found, Harold lost control over the lantern which he flashed into everybody's face in turn, so that John rendered as helpless as a Buff-tip walked head foremost into a sopping bush by the side of the path. However, the various accidents of arrival all escaped being serious, and the thought of dinner shortened the affectionate greetings. Remembering how Hugh had paid out Harold with his own air-gun John greeted his youngest brother more cordially than he could ever have supposed it was possible to greet him again.

By general consent the owner of the house was allowed to be tired that evening, and all discussion of the Christmas preparations was postponed until the next day. Harold made a surreptitious attempt to break into the most promising parcel he could find, but he was ill rewarded by the inside, which happened to be a patent carpet-sweeper.

Before old Mrs. Touchwood went to bed she took John aside and whispered:

"They're all against Hughie. But I've tried to make the poor boy feel that he's at home, and dear Georgie will be coming very soon, which will make it pleasanter for Hugh, and I've thought of a nice way to manage Jimmie."

"I think you worry yourself needlessly over Hugh, Mama; I can assure you he's perfectly capable of looking after himself."

"I hope so," the old lady sighed. "All my patience came out beautifully this evening. So I hope Hughie will be all right. He seemed to think you were a little annoyed with him."

"Did he tell you why?"

"Not exactly; but I understand it was something to do with money. You mustn't be too strict with Hugh about money, John. You must always remember that he hasn't got all the money he wants, and you must make allowances accordingly. Ah dear, peace on earth, goodwill towards men! But I don't

## Poor Relations

complain. I'm very happy here with my patience, and say something can be done to get rid of the bees made a nest in the wall just under my bedroom. They're asleep now, but when they begin to buzz warm weather Huggins must try and induce them somewhere else. Good night, my dear boy."

Next morning when John leaned out of his window the Hampshire air and contemplate his domain he was to perceive upon the lawn below a large quadrangle in which two workmen were actually digging.

"Hi! What are you doing?" he shouted.

The workmen stared at John, stared at one another at their spades, and went on with their digging.

"Hi! What the devil are you doing?"

The workmen paid no attention; but the voice came trickling round the corner of the house with of self-satisfaction.

"I didn't do it, Uncle John. I began geology last. I haven't dug up *anything*. Mother wouldn't let me. Uncle Hugh and Uncle Laurence. Mother knew angry when you saw what a mess the garden was in look untidy, doesn't it? Huggins said he should call you, first thing. He says he'd just as soon put bricks on the paths as *that* gravel. Did you know that Ambler on a gravel subsoil, Uncle John? Aren't you glad, because geology book says that a gravel subsoil is the healthiest. John removed himself abruptly out of earshot.

"What is that pernicious mess on the front lawn demanded of Hugh half-an-hour later at breakfast

"Ah, you noticed it, did you?"

"Noticed it? I should think I did notice it. I know that you're responsible."

"Not entirely," Laurence interposed gently. "I must accept a joint responsibility. The truth is that at the time now I've felt that my work has been terribly affected by little household noises, and Hugh recommended I should build myself an outside study. He has made a very good design, and has kindly undertaken to supervise its execution. As you have seen, they are already well on with the foundation."

The design which I shall show you after breakfast is in keeping with the house, and of course you will have the advantage of what I call my little Gazebo when I leave Ambles. Have I told you that I'm considering a brief experience of the realities of the stage? After all, why not? Shakespeare was an actor."

If John had been eating anything more solid than a lightly boiled egg at the moment he must have choked.

"You can call it your little Gazebo as much as you like; it's nothing but a confounded summerhouse," he shouted.

"Look here, Johnnie," said Hugh soothingly; "you'll like it when it's finished. This isn't one of Stevie's Gothic contortions. I admit that to get the full architectural effect there should be a couple of them. You see, I've followed the design of the famous dovecotes at . . ."

"Dovecotes be damned," John exploded. "I instructed you to prepare the house for Christmas; I didn't ask you to build me a new one."

"Laurence felt that he was in the way indoors," Edith explained timidly.

"The impression was rather forced upon me," said Laurence with a glance at Hilda, who throughout the dispute had been sitting virtuously silent; nor did she open her thin lips now.

"He was going to pay for his hermitage out of the money he ought to have made from writing *Lamp-posts*," Edith went on in a muddled exposition of her husband's motives. "I wasn't thinking of himself at all. But of course if you object his building this Gas—oh, I am so bad at proper names—you understand. Won't you, dear?"

"Oh, I shall understand," Laurence admitted with expression of painfully achieved comprehension. "Though I may fail to see the necessity for such strong language."

Frida wriggled in the coils of an endless whisper from her mother extricated her at last by murmuring:

"Hush, darling, Uncle John is a little vexed about the thing."

Hilda and her son still sat in mute self-right. Grandmama, who always had her breakfast in bed, present to defend Hugh.

## *Poor Relations*

"If it had been anywhere except on the lawn right of my room," John began more mildly.

"We tried to combine suitability of site with access," Laurence condescended to explain. "But say another word," he added, waving his finger-wands to induce John's silence. "The idea of my doing does not appeal to you. That is enough. I do not want money already spent upon the foundations. Further will irritate us all, and I for one have no wish to mar the harmony of the season." Then exchanging his martyrdom for the suave jocularities of a vicar, "And when are we to expect our Yuletide guests, that the greater portion of your luggage is still at the station-master at Wrothamford. If I can be of aid in the transport of what rumour says is commissariat, do not hesitate to call upon me, giving the Muse a holiday and am ready to surpass the marmalade, please."

John felt incapable of further argument with Hugh in combination, and having gained his subject of the Gazebo drop. He was glad that she was not here; he felt that she might have been tedious of what he tried to believe was recognized in his heart as 'meekness,' even

"When are Cousin Bertram and Cousin Harold asked."

"Wow-wow-wow!" Hugh imitated, expressing the general opinion of Harold's breakfast-table conversation.

"For goodness' sake, boy, don't talk about those were elderly colonial connections," John said, with the resurgent valour that Harold always showed, and Viola are coming to-morrow. By the way, any accommodation for a monkey? I don't know, but Bertram talked vaguely of bringing one. Possibly a small annexe could be built for the house."

"A monkey?" Edith exclaimed. "It won't attack dear Frida."



"I shall shoot him, if he does," Harold boasted. "I shot mole last week."

"No, you didn't, you young liar," Hugh contradicted. "It was killed by the trap."

"Harold is always a very truthful little boy," said his mother glaring.

"Is he? I hadn't noticed it," Hugh retorted.

"Far be it from me to indulge in odious comparisons," Laurence interposed grandly. "But I cannot help being a rifle—ah—tickled by so much consideration's being exhibited on account of the temporary lodging of a monkey and so much animus—however, don't let us rake up a disagreeable topic."

John thought it was a pity that his brother-in-law had not felt the same about raking up the lawn when after breakfast he was telling Huggins to fill in the hole and hearing that it was unlikely to lose the scar for a long time.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather, sir, when they started in hacking away at a lovely piece of turf like that."

"I'm sure I could," John agreed warmly.

"But what's done can't be undone, and the best way to mend a bad job would be to make a bed for ornamental annuals. Yes, sir, a nice bed in the shape of a star—or a shell."

"No thanks, Huggins, I should prefer grass again, even if for a year or two the lawn does look as if it had been recently vaccinated."

John's Christmas enthusiasm had been thoroughly damped by the atmosphere of Ambles and he regretted that he had let himself be persuaded into coming down two days earlier than he had intended. It had been Mrs. Worfolk's fault, when his housekeeper approached him with a complaint about the way things were being managed in the kitchen John told her rather sharply that she must make the best of the poor arrangements, exercise as much tact as possible, and remember that Christmas was a season when discontent was out of fashion. Then he retreated to the twenty-acre field to lose a few balls. Alas, he had forgotten that Laurence had promised himself to be in a holiday humour and was bored to find this was so expansive as to include an ambition to see what was as difficult as people said.

## Poor Relations

"You can try a stroke if you really want to," John grudgingly.

"I understand that the theory of striking involves application of the hands to the club," said the novice much store by the old adage that well begun is half done.

"The main thing is to hit the ball."

"I've no doubt whatever about being able to hit it, but if I decide to adopt golf as a recreation from my work I wish to acquire a good style at the outset," intoned, picking up the club as solemnly as if he were baptizing it. "What is your advice about the force of the left hand? It feels to me somewhat ubiquitous that there is some inhibition upon excessive fidgeting."

"Keep your eye on the ball," John gruffly. "And don't shift your position."

"One, two, three," murmured Laurence, raising his hand above his shoulder.

"Fore!" John shouted to a rash member of the party who was crossing the line of fire.

A lump of turf was propelled a few feet in the air, striking the admonished figure, and the ball was hammered into the soft earth.

"You distracted me by counting four," Laurence said. "My intention was to strike at three. However, I don't succeed . . ."

But John could stand no more of it and escaped to the garden where he bought a bushel of lustrous ornaments from the masquerade tree that was even now being felled by the coppice remote from Harold's myopic explorations. Two days the household worked feverishly and the prevalent odour of allspice; the children were kept in the house while the presents were mysteriously distributed in the drawing-room, which had been consecrated to the coming revelry; Harold, after nearly involving himself in a scandal by hiding himself under the kitchen table to see one of the servants' meals in order to verify the quality of their several stockings, was finally successful in borrowing from Mrs. Worfolk for the loan of one of hers; and he talked as ceaselessly as a grove of poplars, and everybody

tattooed by holly-pricks; and the introduction of so much decorative vegetation into the house brought with it a train of somnambulant insects.

On Saturday afternoon the remaining guests arrived, and when John heard Bertram and Viola shouting merrily up and down the corridors he recognized the authentic note of Christmas gaiety at last. James was much less disagreeable than he had expected, and did not even freeze Beatrice when she gushed about the loveliness of the holly and reminded everybody that she was countrified herself; Hilda and Eleanor were brought together by their common dread of Hugh's apparent return to favour; George exuded a gross reproduction of the host's good will and wandered about the room reading jokes from the Christmas numbers to those who would listen to him; Laurence kissed all the ladies under the mistletoe, bending down to them from his majesty as patronizingly as in the days of his faith he used to communicate the poor of the parish; Edith clapped her hands every time that Laurence brought off a kiss, and talked in a heartfelt tremolo about the Christmas-tides of her girlhood; Frida conceived an adoration for Viola; Hugh egged on Bertram to tease, threaten, and contradict Harold on every occasion; Grandmama in a new butter-coloured gown glowed in the lamplight, and purred over her fertility, as if on the day she had accepted Robert Touchwood's hand nearly half a century ago she had foreseen this gathering and had never grumbled afterward when she found she was going to have another baby.

"Snapdragon will be ready at ten," John proclaimed, "and then to bed, so that we're all fit for Christmas Day."

He was anxious to get the household out of the way, because he had formed a project to dress himself up that night as Santa Claus and, as he put it to himself, stimulate the children's fancy in case they should be awake when their stockings were being filled.

The clock struck ten; Mrs. Worfolk gave portentous utterance to the information that the snapdragon was burning 'beautiful'; there was a rush for the pantry where the ceremony was to take place. Laurence picked out his raisins as triumphantly as if he were snatching souls from a discredited Romish

## *Poor Relations*

purgatory. Harold notwithstanding his bad sight seemed doing well until Bertram temporarily disabled him by taking a glowing raisin from the fiercest flame and raking it down his neck. But the one who ate most of all, more than Harold, was George, whose fat fingers would scoop up a dozen raisins at a go, were they never so hot, until the blue flames flickered less alertly and finally died altogether in a pungency of burnt brandy.

"Half-past ten," John, who was longing to drop to bed, cried impatiently.

His efforts to urge the family up to bed were rather interfered with by Laurence, who detained Eleanor with questions about going on the stage with a view to pointing out a few technical deficiencies in his dramatic craftsmanship.

"I'm anxious to establish by personal experience the length of the interval required to change one's costume, also the distance from one's green-room to the theatre—I do not aim high. I should be perfectly satisfied to play minor parts as Rosencrantz or Metellus Cimber. Eleanor, you will introduce me to some of your friends after the holidays? There is a reduced day to town every Thursday. We might lunch together at those little Bohemian restaurants where rumour says an excellent lunch is to be had for one and sixpence."

Eleanor promised she would do all she could, but he evidently wanted her to go to bed, and he was tired of his children.

"Thank you, Eleanor. I hope that as a catechism will do honour to you. By the way, you will be interested as part of Pontius Pilate's wife in my play. In fact I think that you will—ah—interpret it ultimately."

"Did you ever think of writing a play about a wife?" James growled on his way upstairs. "Good night."

When the grown-ups were safely in their rooms, the children did not understand why the children were allowed to lie in bed, gossiping and bragging; they would never get on at this rate.

"I've got two cocoons of a Crimson-underwin," the girl was saying.

"Poof!" Viola scoffed. "What are they? Bertram touched the nose of a kangaroo last time we went to the Zoo."

"Yes, and I prodded a crocodile with V's umbrella," added Bertram, acknowledging her testimonial by awarding his sister a kind of share in the exploit.

"Well, I was bitten by a squirrel once," related Harold in an attempt to keep his end up. "And that was in its nest, not in a cage."

"A squirrel!" Viola sneered. "Why, the tallest giraffe licked Bertram's fingers with his tongue, and they stayed wet for hours afterwards."

"Well, so could I, if I went to the Zoo," Harold maintained with a sob at the back of his throat.

"No, you couldn't," Bertram contradicted. "Because your fingers are too smelly."

"Much too smelly!" Viola corroborated.

Various mothers emerged at this point and put a stop to the contest; the hallowed and gracious silence of Christmas night descended upon Ambles; John went on tiptoe up to his bedroom.

"The beard, I suppose, is the most important item," he said to himself, when he had unpacked his costume.

It was a noble beard, and when John had fixed it to his cheeks with a profusion of spirit-gum, he made up his mind that it became him so well that he would grow one of his own which whitening with the flight of time would in another thirty years make him look what he hoped to be—the do of romantic playwrights. The scarlet robe of Santa Claus with its trimming of bells, icicles, and holly and its ruching of fur had been made in a single piece without buttons, so that John put it over his head the beard caught in the folds and of it was combed out by an icicle. In trying to disentangle himself John managed to get one sleeve stuck to his cheek more firmly than the beard had ever been. Nor were his struggles to free himself made easier by the bells, which with every movement and made him afraid that they would knock at the door soon and ask if he had rung. When he got the robe in place, plucked several bits of sleeve and cheek, renovated the beard, gathered together



off his beard in handfuls and flinging all the properties into a corner.

"Anyway, whoever it is," he said, "he'll get the credit of driving Frida mad. That's one thing. But who is it? I suppose it's Laurence showing us how well he can act."

But it was Aubrey Fenton whom Hugh had invited down to Ambles for Christmas and smuggled into the house like this to sweeten the unpleasant surprise. What annoyed John most was that he himself had never thought of using the toboggan; however, the new Santa Claus was an undoubted success with the children, and Frida's sanity was soon restored by chocolates. The mystery of the apples and oranges strewn about her bedroom remained a mystery, though Hilda tried to hint that her niece had abstracted them from the sideboard.

John was able to obtain as much sympathy as he wanted from the rest of the family over Hugh's importation of his friend. In fact they were so eager to express their disapproval of such calm self-assurance, not to mention the objectionable way in which he had woken everybody up in the middle of the night, that John's own indignation gradually melted away in the heat of their malice. As for Grandmama, she shut herself up in her bedroom on Christmas morning and threatened not to appear all day, so deep was her hatred of that young Fenton who was the author of all Hugh's little weaknesses—not even when she could shift the blame could she bring herself to call her son's vices and crimes by any stronger name. Aubrey, who lacked Hugh's serene insolence, wanted to go back to London and was so much abashed in his host's presence and so apprehensive of what he had done in the affair of the cheque that John's compassion was aroused and he made the intruder welcome. His hospitality was rewarded, because it turned out that Aubrey's lifelong passion for mechanical toys saved the situation for many of John's purchases, nearly all of which he agreed to set in motion; nor could it be laid to his account that one of the drawing-room fireworks behaved like an outdoor firework, because while Aubrey was lighting it at the end Harold was lighting it simultaneously at the other

On the whole, the presentation of the Christmas passed off satisfactorily. The only definite display of





"What a bung!" exclaimed Bertram. "You've only read *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth and Round the World in Eighty Days*."

Then he remembered Frida's attitude. "Look here, if you take the fireman's uniform you can set fire to Frida's house."

Frida yelled her refusal.

"And put it out, you little idiot," Bertram added.

"And put it out," Viola echoed.

Frida rushed to her mother.

"Mother, mother, don't let them burn my dolls'-house! Mother, you won't, will you? Bertram wants to burn it."

"Naughty Bertram!" said Edith. "But he's only teasing you, darling."

"Good lummy, what a sneak," Bertram commented bitterly to his sister.

Viola eyed her cousin with the scorn of an Antigone.

"Beastly," she murmured. "Come on, Bertram, you don't want the diver's dress."

"Rather not. And anyway it won't work."

"It will. It will," cried Harold passionately. "I'm going to practise in a water-butt the first fine day we have."

It chanced that John was unable to feel himself happily above these childish jealousies, because at that moment he was himself smarting with resentment at his mother's handing over to James all that she still retained of family heirlooms. His eldest brother already had the portraits, and now he was to have what was left of the silver, which would look utterly out of place in Hill Road. If John had been as young as Bertram, he would have spoken his mind pretty freely on the subject of giving James the silver and himself a chequered woollen kettle-holder. It was really too disproportionate, and he did mildly protest to the old lady that she might have left a few things at Ambles.

"But Jimmie is the eldest, and I expect him to take poor Hugh's part. The poor boy will want somebody when I'm gone, and Jimmie is the eldest."

"He may be the eldest, but I'm the one who has to look after Hugh—and very often James, for that matter."



"Miss Hamilton?" said Grandmama. "And who may Miss Hamilton be?"

Hilda, Edith, Eleanor, and Beatrice all looked very solemn and mysterious; James chuckled; Hugh brightened visibly.

"Well, I suppose we mustn't mind a stranger's coming to spoil our happy party," Hilda sighed.

"Ah, this will be your new secretary of whom rumour has already spoken," said Laurence. "Possibly she will give me some advice on the subject of the typing of manuscripts."

"Miss Hamilton will be very busy while she is staying here," said John curtly.

Everybody looked at everybody else, and there was an awkward pause, which was relieved by Harold's saying that he would show her where he thought a goldfinch would make a nest in Spring.

"Dear little man," murmured his mother with a sigh for his childish confidence.

"Shall I drive in to meet her?" Hugh suggested.

"No, thank you," said John quickly.

"That's right, Johnnie," James guffawed. "You stick to the reins yourself."

## Chapter Twelve

JOHN did not consider himself a first class whip been offered the choice between swimming t love like Leander, climbing into her father's t Romeo, and driving to meet her with a dog-cart certainly, had the engagement shown signs of being have chosen any mode of trysting except the last. ing, however, he was not as usual oppressed by a perfect sympathy between himself and the mare ; think she was going to have hysterics when she bl nor fancy that she was on the verge of bolting wh her chestnut mane ; the absence of William th seemed a matter for congratulation rather than fi felt as reckless as Phaeton, as urgent as Jehu, and r' it. Generally, when her master held the reins, s. to walk up steep banks or emulate in her caprici lofty browsings of the giraffe ; this morning at a ing trot she kept to the middle of the road, passe cars without trying to box the landscape, and " at the new hat of the vicar's wife.

Later on, however, when John was safe in th and saw the familiar way in which Miss Hamilt mare he decided not to take any risk on the retu in spite of his brother's parting gibe to hand ov his secretary ; nor was the symbolism of the ac. How charming she looked in that mauve friez the colour was harmonizing with the purple he. naturally she seemed to haunt the woodland s.

" Oh. this exquisite country," she sighed. " in London when you can write here ! "

" It does seem absurd," the lucky author aga house is very full at present. We shall be ra interruptions until the party breaks up."

He gave her an account of the Christmas f she seemed able to listen comfortably and a

spite of the fact that she was driving. This impressed John very much.

"I hope your mother wasn't angry at your leaving town," he said tentatively. "I thought of telegraphing an invitation to her; but there really isn't room for another person."

"I'm afraid I can't say that she was gracious about my desertion of her. Indeed, she's beginning to put pressure on me to give up my post. Quite indirectly, of course; but one feels the effect just the same. Who knows? I may succumb."

John nearly fell out of the dogcart.

"Give up your post?" he gasped. "But, my dear Miss Hamilton, the dog-roses won't be in bloom for some months."

"What have dog-roses got to do with my post?"

He laughed a little foolishly.

"I mean the play won't be finished for some months. Did I say dog-roses? I must have been thinking of the dogcart. You drive with such admirable unconcern. Still, you ought to see these hedgerows in summer. Now the time I like for a walk is about eight o'clock on a June evening. The honeysuckle smells so delicious about eight o'clock. There's no doubt it is ridiculous to live in London. I hope you made it quite clear to your mother you had no intention of leaving me?"

"Ida Merritt did most of the arguing."

"Did she? What a very intelligent girl she is, by the way. I confess I took a great fancy to her."

"You told mother once that she frightened you."

"Ah, but I'm always frightened by people when I meet them first. Though curiously enough I was never frightened of you. Some people have told me that *I* am frightening at first. You didn't find that, did you?"

"No, I certainly did not. And I can't imagine anybody else's doing so either."

Although John rather plumed himself upon the alarm he was credited with inspiring at first sight, he did not argue the point, because he really never had had the least desire to frighten his secretary.

"And your relations don't seem to find you very frightening," she murmured. "Good gracious, what an assemblage!"

The dogcart had just drawn clear of the beechwood, and

## Poor Relations

the whole of the Ambles party could be seen vigilant by the gate to receive them, which John thought of taste on the part of his guests. Nor was he mollified in which after the introductions were made it upon himself to conduct Miss Hamilton indoors was left shouting for William the groom. If it was business except his own to escort her into the house Hilda's.

"What a very extraordinary thing," said John "that the *only* person who's wanted is not here. that confounded boy?"

"I'm here," cried Bertram, responding to the instinctively.

"Not you. Not you. I want William to take the

When lunch was over John found that notwithstanding the secretary's arrival he was less eager to begin work his play than he had supposed.

"I think I must be feeling rather worn out by the," he told her. "I wonder if a walk wouldn't do you the journey."

"Now that's a capital notion," exclaimed Hugh standing close by and overheard the suggestion. "tramp up to the top of Shalstead Down."

"Oh yes," Harold chimed in. "I've never been Mother said it was too far for me; but it isn't, is it John?"

"Your mother was right. It's at least three miles far," said John firmly. "Oh, and by the way, Hugh thinking over your scheme for that summerhouse or you call it, and I'm not sure that I don't rather think after all. You might put it in hand this afternoon better keep Laurence with you. I want him to have his way he likes it, although of course I shall undertake to do it. Where's Bertram? Ah, there you are. Bertram, you and Viola take Harold down to the river for diving? I daresay Mr. Fenton will superintend the supply of air and reduce the chances of a fatal accident."

"But the water's much too cold," Hilda put in with dismay.

"Oh well, there's always something to amuse one by a river without actually going into the water," John said. "You like rivers, don't you, Fenton? I'm afraid we can't offer you a very large one, but it wiggles most picturesquely."

Aubrey Fenton, who was still feeling twinges of embarrassment on account of his uninvited stay at Ambles, was prepared to like anything his host put forward for his appreciation, and he spoke with as much enthusiasm of a promenade along the banks of the small Hampshire stream as if he were going to view the Ganges for the first time. John, having disposed of him, looked round for other possible candidates for a walk.

"You look like hard work, James," he said approvingly.

"I've a bundle of trash here for review," the critic growled.

"I'm sorry. I was going to propose a stroll up Shalstead Down. Never mind. You'll have to walk into your victims instead." And, by gad, he would walk into them too, John thought, after that dinner yesterday.

Beatrice and Eleanor were not about; old Mrs. Touchwood was unlikely at her age to venture up the third highest elevation in Hampshire; Hilda was occupied with household duties; Edith had a headache. Only George now remained unoccupied, and John was sure he might safely risk an invitation to him; he looked incapable of walking two yards.

"I suppose you wouldn't care for a constitutional, George?" he enquired heartily.

"A constitutional?" George repeated, gaping like a chub at a large cherry. "No, no, no, no. I always knit after lunch. Besides I never walk in the country. It ruins one's boots."

George always used to polish his own boots with as much passionate care as he would have devoted to the colouring of a meerschau pipe.

"Well, if nobody wants to climb Shalstead Down," said John beaming happily, "what do you say, Miss Hamilton?"

A few minutes later they had crossed the twenty-acre field and were among the chalk-flecked billows of the rising downs.

"You're a terrible fraud," she laughed. "You've always led me to believe that you were completely at the mercy of your relations. Instead of which, you order them about and arrange their afternoon and really bully them into doing all

## Poor Relations

sorts of things they never had any intention of doing, wish to do, what's more."

"Yes, I seemed to be rather successful with my to-day," John admitted. "But they were stupefied at Christmas dinner. None of them was really anxious to walk, and I didn't want to drag them out unwillingly."

"Ah, it's all very well to explain it away like that, but never ask me to sympathize with you again. I believe I am a replica of my poor mother. Her tyranny is deeply to be considered for others. Why do you suppose she is trying to make me give up working for you? For Oh, dear no! For mine."

"But *you* don't forge my name and expect her to come back. *You* don't arrive suddenly and deposit children at her doorstep."

"I daresay I don't, but for my mother Ida Mieland sends all the excesses of your relations combined in one. I'm convinced that if you and she were to compare notes, they would find that you were both suffering from acute jealousy and thoroughly enjoying it. But come, come, let's have a serious conversation. What about the fourth act?"

"The fourth act of what?" he asked vaguely.

"The fourth act of *Joan of Arc*."

"Oh, Joan of Arc. I think I must give her a rest. I don't seem at all in the mood for writing at present. I find that I find Joan rather lacking in humanity and I don't want to think I made a mistake in choosing such an abnormal character for the central figure of a play."

"Then what have I come down to Hampshire for?" he demanded.

"Well, it's very jolly down here, isn't it?" John said in an offended voice. "And anyway you can't expect me to burst into blank verse the moment you arrive, like my mother. That's been uncovered by the housemaid. It was an affectation to pretend I feel poetical this afternoon. I'm like a jolly good tramp before tea. I can't stand it. I always want to be literary. I have the temper of a country squire, and if I had more money and fewer children I should hardly write at all."



"Which would be a great pity," said his secretary.

"Would it?" John replied in the voice of one who has found an unexpected grievance and is determined to make the most of it. "I doubt if it would. What is my work, after all? I don't deceive myself. There was more in my six novels than in anything I've written since. I'm a failure to myself. In the eyes of the public I may be a success, but in the depths of my own heart——" he finished the sentence in a long sigh, all the longer because he was a little out of breath with climbing.

"But you were so cheerful a few minutes ago. I'm sure that country squires are not the prey to such swift changes of mood. I think you must be a poet really."

"A poet!" he exclaimed bitterly with what he fancied was the kind of laugh that is called hollow. "Do I look like a poet?"

"If you're going to talk in that childish way I shan't say any more," she warned him severely. "Oh, there goes a hare!"

"Two hares," said John, trying to create an impression that in spite of the weight of his despondency he would for her sake affect a light-hearted interest in the common incidents of a country walk.

"And look at the peewits," she said. "What a fuss they make about nothing, don't they?"

"I suppose you are comparing me to a peewit now?" John reproachfully suggested.

"Well, a moment ago you compared yourself to an uncovered canary; so if I've exceeded the bounds of free speech marked out for a secretary, you must forgive me."

"My dear Miss Hamilton," he assured her, "I beg you to believe that you are at liberty to compare me to anything you like."

Having surrendered his personality for the exercise of her wit John felt more cheerful. The rest of the walk seemed to offer with its wide prospects of country asleep in the winter sunlight a wider prospect of life itself; even Joan of Arc became once again a human figure.

It was to be feared that John's manipulation of his guests after lunch might have had the effect of uniting them against the new favourite; and so it had. When he and Miss Hamilton

## *Poor Relations*

got back to the house for tea the family was obviously on the defensive, so obviously indeed that it gave the impression of a sculptor's group in which each figure was contributing its posture to the whole. There was not as yet the least attack, but John would almost have preferred an action to this martyred withdrawal from the world in which it was suggested that he and Miss Hamilton were living their lives. It happened that a neighbour, a colourless man, a disobedient and bushy dog, called upon the Touchwits one afternoon, and John could not help being aware through the eyes of his relations he and his secretary appeared intrusive and disturbing; the manner in which Harold and Miss Hamilton tea scarcely differed from the manner in which she propitiated the dog with a bun; and it would be rash to assert that she was more afraid of the dog than of Harold than of the secretary's doing so.

"Don't worry Miss Hamilton, darling. She's used to her long walk. Besides, she isn't used to little boys. I don't make Mr. Wenlow's dog eat sugar if it don't want to."

Eleanor would ordinarily have urged Bertram to try that he could achieve what was denied to his cousin. In the face of a common enemy she made overtures by simultaneously calling off her own children against the intruders.

"If I'd known that animals were so welcome," James grumbled, "I should have brought Beyle with me."

It was not a polite remark; but the disobedient effusion of cordiality had just licked the back of Harold's hand and he was not nearly so rude as he would have been to a human being who had surprised him, speaking in the same way.

"Lie down, Rover," whispered the colourless woman with so rich a blush that until it subsided the colour was to be appropriate.

Rover unexpectedly paid attention to the command, chose Grandmama's lap for his resting place, and Viola laugh so ecstatically that Frida felt bound to get up with the result that a geyser of tea spouted from

and descended upon her father's leg. Laurence sternly led his daughter from the room, saying :

"Little girls who choke in drawing-rooms must learn to choke outside."

"I'm afraid she has adenoids, poor child," said Eleanor kindly.

"I know what that word means," Harold bragged with gloating knowledge.

"Shut up!" cried Bertram. "You know everything, glass-eyes. But you don't know there are two worms in your tea-cup."

"There aren't," Harold contradicted.

"All right, drink it up and see. I put them there myself."

"Eleanor!" expostulated the horrified mother. "Do you allow Bertram to behave like this?"

She hurriedly poured away the contents of Harold's cup, which proved that the worms were only an invention of his cousin. Yet the joke was successful in its way, because there was no more tea, and therefore Harold had to go without a third cup. Edith, whose agitation had been intense while her husband was brooding in the passage over Frida's chokes, could stay still no longer, but went out to assist with tugs and taps of consolation. The colourless visitor departed with his disobedient dog, and soon a thin pipe was heard in vain whistling upon the twilight like the lisp of reeds along the dreary margin of a December stream.

John welcomed this recrudescence of maternal competition which seemed likely to imperil the alliance, and he was grateful to Bertram and Viola for their provocation of it. But he scarcely congratulated himself, when Hugh came in and once laid himself out to be agreeable to Miss Hamilton.

"You've put the summerhouse in hand?" John fussily, in order to make it perfectly clear to his brother he was not the owner of Ambles.

Hugh shook his head.

"My dear man, it's Boxing Day. Besides, I only wanted to get rid of me this afternoon. By Aubrey's going back to town to-night. Can he dogcart?"



"I don't mean to hint that she's *only* after Hugh's money. I've no doubt at all that she's excessively in love with him."

"Really?" John exclaimed with such a scornfully ironical intonation that his mother asked anxiously if he had a sore throat.

"You might take a little honey and borax, my dear boy," she advised, and immediately continued her estimate of the emotional situation. "Yes, as I say, excessively in love! But there can't be many young women who resist Hugh. Why, even as a boy he had his little love-affairs. Dear me, how poor Papa used to laugh about them. 'He's going to break a lot of hearts,' poor Papa used to say."

"I don't know about hearts," John commented gruffly. "But he's broken everything else including himself. However, I can assure you, Mama, that Miss Hamilton's heart is not made of pie-crust, and that she is more than capable of looking after herself."

"Then you agree with me that she has a selfish disposition. I *am* glad you agree with me. I didn't trust her from the beginning; but I thought you seemed so wrapped up in her cleverness—though when I was young women didn't think it necessary to be clever—that you were quite blind to her selfishness. But I *am* glad you agree with me. There's nobody who has more sympathy for true love than I have. But though I've always said that love makes the world go round, I've never been partial to vulgar flirtations. Indeed, if it had to be, I'd rather they got engaged properly, even if it did mean a long engagement—but leading poor Hughie on like this, well, I must speak plainly, Johnnie, for after all I am your mother, though I know it's the fashion now to think that children know more than their parents, and in my opinion you ought to put your foot down. There! I've said what I've been wanting to say for a week, and if you jump down my throat, well, then you must, and that's all there is to it."

Now, although John thought his mother fondly stupid and was perfectly convinced when he asked himself the question that Miss Hamilton was as remote from admiring Hugh as he was himself, he was nevertheless unable to resist observing Hugh henceforth with a little of the jealousy that most men of



which he sat mute as a mummy in a kind of cataleptic ecstasy. The betrayer of this profound peace sullenly gathered up the rubbish with which he was wont to litter the room every night, and John saw Bertram's eye flash like a Corsican sharpening the knife of revenge. But whatever was in store for Harold lacked savour when John heard from the group of mothers, aunts, sisters, and sisters-in-law the two words "Children know" dying away in a sibilance of affirmative sighs.

After that it was small consolation to hear a scuffle outside in the hall followed by the crash of Harold's dispersed collections and a wail of protest. For the sake of a childish quarrel Hilda and Eleanor were not going to break up the alliance to which they were now definitely committed.

"It's so nice for poor Harold to have Bertram to play with him," volunteered one mother.

"Yes, and it's nice for Bertram too, because Harold's such a little worker," the other agreed.

Even George's opaque eyes glimmered with an illusion of life when he heard his wife praise her nephew; she had not astonished him so completely since on a wet afternoon thirteen years ago she accepted his hand. It was obvious even to Edith that she must begin to think about taking sides; and having exhausted her intelligence by this discovery she had not enough wit left to see that now was her opportunity to trade upon John's sentimental affection for herself, but proceeded to sacrifice her own daughter to the success of the hostile alliance.

"I think perhaps it's good for Frida to be teased sometimes," she ventured.

As for Beatrice, she was not going to draw attention to her childlessness by giving one more woman the chance of feeling superior to herself, and her thwarted maternity was placed at the disposal of the three mothers. Indeed it was she who led the first foray, in which she was herself severely wounded, as will be seen.

Among the unnecessary vexations and unsatisfactory pleasures which the human side of John inflicted upon the well-known dramatist John Touchwood was the collection of press-cuttings about himself and his work; one of Miss

## Poor Relations

Hamilton's least congenial task was to preserve in book these tributes to egoism.

"You don't really want me to stick in this paragraph *High Life*?" she would protest.

"Which one is that?"

"Why, this ridiculous announcement that you've to live on the upper slopes of the Andes for the next five years in order to gather material for a tragedy about the Incas."

"Oh, I don't know. It's rather amusing, I think," he would insist apologetically. Then he would add lazily, "see, I subscribe."

Miss Hamilton with a sigh would dip her brush.

"I can understand your keeping the notices of your publications, which I suppose have a certain value, but not this childish gossip . . ."

"Gossip keeps my name before the public."

Then he would fancy that he caught a faint mist of 'lack of dignity,' and once even he thought of something about 'lack of humour.'

Therefore in view of the importance he attached to the most irrelevant paragraph Miss Hamilton would be blamed for drawing his attention to a long article of those critical quarterlies or monthlies that the club smoking-rooms in the same spirit of idleness as the railway-stations belated travellers read there. The article was entitled *What is wrong with our Drama* and signed with some obscurely allusive literary pseudonym.

"I suppose I am involved in the general criticism," said John with an attempt at a debonair indifference.

Had he been alone he might have refrained from going into particulars, but having laid so much to waste in salvage of worthless flotsam he could not in the presence of his friends ignore this large wreck.

"Let us pause now to contemplate the ruin of our romantic cherubs. Ha-ha! I suppose that will irritate me. As a matter of fact it is rather funny, don't you? Rather clever, I mean. *Why should we take Mr. Touchwood seriously?* an exuberant schoolboy prancing about with



his head and shouting 'Let's pretend I'm a Knight-at-Arms' to a large and susceptible public. Let us say to Mr. Touchwood in the words of an earlier romantic who was the fount and origin of all this Gothic stucco:

O what can ail thee, Knight-at-Arms,  
So staggered by the critics' tone?  
The pit and gallery are full,  
And the play has gone."

"I don't mind what he says about me," John assured his secretary. "But I do resent his parodying Keats. Yes, I do strongly resent that. I wonder who wrote it. I call it rather personal for anonymous criticism."

"Shall I stick it in the book?"

"Certainly," the wounded lion uttered with a roar of disdain. At least that was the way John fancied he said 'certainly.'

"Do you really want to know who wrote this article?" she asked seriously, a minute or two later.

"It wasn't James?" the victim exclaimed in a flash of comprehension.

"Well, all I can tell you is that two or three days ago your brother received a copy of the review and a letter from the editorial offices. I was sorting out your letters and noticed the address on the outside. Afterwards at breakfast he opened it and took out a cheque."

"James would call me a rosy cherub," John muttered. "Moreover, I did tell him about Bertram and the pudding-dish when they were playing at Perseus. And no, James doesn't admire Keats."

"Poor man," said Miss Hamilton charitably.

"Yes, I suppose one ought to be sorry for him rather than angry," agreed John, snatching at the implied consolation. "All the same, I think I ought to speak to him about his behaviour. Of course he's quite at liberty to despise my work, but I don't think he should take advantage of our relationship to introduce a note of personal—well, really, I don't think he has any right to call me a round and rosy cherub in print. After all, the public doesn't know what a damned failure James himself is. I shouldn't so mind if it really was a big pot

## *Poor Relations*

calling the kettle black. I could retaliate then. But I can do nothing."

"Except stick it in your press-cutting book," Miss Hamilton with a smile.

"And then my mother goes and presents him with silver! No, I will not overlook this lapse of taste and speak to him about it this morning. But suppose he finds out how I found out?"

"You must tell him."

"You don't mind?"

"I'm your secretary, aren't I?"

"By Jove, Miss Hamilton, you know, you really surprised me," John stopped. He wanted to tell her what a generosity was to his wound; but he felt that he must prefer him to be practical.

It was like the critic to welcome with composure the admission of what John called his duplicity, or rather called duplicity in the privacy of his own thoughts and he began by referring to it as exaggerated frankness.

"I said nothing more than I've said a hundred times to your face," his brother pointed out.

"That may be, but you didn't borrow money for the strength of what you said. You told me you had seen Alfred de Vigny appearing shortly. You did that you were raising the money as a post office reputation."

"My dear Johnnie, if you're going to abuse me in this way be just at any rate. Your reputation was a complete dissection."

"Very well then," cried John hotly, "have it your way and admit that you're a body-snatcher."

"However," James continued with a laugh that was almost apologetic, "though I hate excuses, I must say that the money I borrowed from you was genuinely yours, of Alfred de Vigny and that this was an unexpected discovery. And to show I bear you no ill will, which is more than is said for most borrowers, here's the cheque I re-bound to say you deserve it."

"I don't want the money."

"Yet in a way you earned it yourself," the critic chuckled. "But let me be quite clear. Is this a family quarrel? I don't want to quarrel with you personally. I hate your work. I think it false, pretentious, and demoralizing. But I like you very much. Do, my dear fellow, let us contrast my good taste in literature and bad taste in manners with your bad taste in literature and good taste in manners. Like two pugilists let's shake hands and walk out of the ring arm-in-arm. Even if I did hit you below the belt, you must blame your curves, Johnnie. You're so plump and rosy that . . ."

"That word is becoming an obsession with you. You seem to think it annoys me, but it doesn't annoy me at all."

"Then it is a family quarrel. Come, your young lady has opened her campaign well. I congratulate her. By the way when am I to congratulate you?"

"This," said John rising with grave dignity, "is going too far."

He left his brother, armed himself with a brasse, proceeded to the twenty-acre field, and made the longest drive of his experience. At lunch James announced that he and Beatrice must be getting back to town that afternoon, a resolution in which his host acquiesced without even a conventional murmur of protest. Perhaps it was this attitude of John's that stung Beatrice into a challenge, or perhaps she had been egged on by the mothers who with their children's future to consider were not anxious to declare open war upon the rich uncle. At any rate, in her commonest voice she said:

"It's plain that Jimmie and I are not wanted here any longer."

The mothers looked down at their plates with what they hoped was a strictly neutral expression. Yet it was impossible not to feel that they were triumphantly digging one another in the ribs with ghostly fingers, such an atmosphere of suppressed elation was discernible above the modest attention they paid to the food before them. Nobody made an effort to cover the awkwardness created by the remark, and John was faced with the alternative of contradicting it or acknowledging its truth; he was certainly not going to be allowed to ignore it in a burst of general conversation.

## *Poor Relations*

"I think that is rather a foolish remark, Beatrice," commented.

She shrugged her shoulders so emphatically that she creaked in the horrid silence that enveloped the table.

"Well, we can't all be as clever as Miss Hamilton. Of course we wouldn't like to be, what's more."

"The dogcart will be round at three," John said coldly.

His sister-in-law bursting into tears rushed from the room. James guffawed and helped himself to potatoes. The mothers reproved their children for breaches of table etiquette. George looked nervously at his wife as if she was on the point of following the example of Beatrice. Grandma, sitting daily receding further and further into the past, took her spectacles and told John reproachfully that he mustn't tease little Beatrice. Hugh engaged Miss Hamilton in conversation about Bernard Shaw. John forgetting he had dipped twice in the mustard the morsel of beef and dipped it again, so that his eyes presently filled with tears, which the observant Harold called everybody's attention to.

"Don't make personal remarks, darling," his wife interpered.

"That's what Johnnie said to me this morning," Harold chuckled.

any allusion to Beatrice, and when the gong sounded for tea his equanimity was in order again.

After tea, however, Eleanor managed to get hold of John for what she called a little chat about the future, but which he detected with the mind's nose as an unpleasant rehash of the morning's pasticcio. He always dreaded this sister-in-law when she opened with zoological endearments, and his spirits sank to hear her exclaim boisterously :

"Now, look here, you poor wounded old lion, I'm going to talk to you seriously about Beatrice."

"There's nothing more to be said," John assured her.

"Now don't be an old bear. You've already made one poor aunt cry ; don't upset me too."

Anybody less likely to be prostrated by grief than Eleanor at that moment John could not have imagined. She seemed to him the incarnation of a sinister self-assurance.

"Rubbish," he snapped. "In any case yours would only be stage tears, you old crocodile—if I may copy your manner of speech."

"Isn't he in a nasty horrid cross mood?" she demanded with an affected glance at an imaginary audience.. "No, but seriously, John ! I do want to give you a little advice: I suppose it's tactless of me to talk about advising the great man, but don't bite my head off."

"In what capacity?" the great man asked. "You've forgotten to specify the precise carnivore that will perform the operation."

"Oh dear, aren't we sarcastic this afternoon?" she asked opening wide her eyes. "However, you're not going to frighten me, because I'm determined to have it out with you, even if you order the dogcart before dinner. Johnnie, is it fair to let a complete stranger make mischief among relations?"

John played the break in Eleanor's voice with beautiful ease.

"I will not have Miss Hamilton's name dragged into these sordid family squabbles," he asseverated.

"I'm not going to say a word against Miss Hamilton. I think she's a charming young woman—a little too charming perhaps for you, you susceptible old goose."

## Poor Relations

"For pity's sake," John begged, "stick to the j leave the farmyard alone."

"Now you're not going to rag me out of what to say. You know that I'm a real Bohemian pay attention to the stupid little conventionalities instance, Hilda or Edith might consider. Therefore you won't misunderstand me when I warn you at talking. Of course, you and I are accustomed to the the profession, and as far as I'm concerned you mi half-a-dozen handsome lady-secretaries without noticing it. But the others don't understand. it's funny."

"Good heavens, what are you trying to su<sub>BB</sub> demanded.

He could manage the break, but this full pit slog wildly.

"I'm not trying to suggest anything. I'm simp what other people may think. You see, after Edith couldn't help noticing that you did allow N to make mischief between you and your broth James was in the wrong; but is it a part of a s to manage her employer? And James is your natural deduction for conventional people like I'il was that—now don't be annoyed at what I'm but I always speak out—I'm famous for my to put it frankly they think that Miss Hamilton round her little finger. Then of course they a why, and for conventional people like Hilda and only one explanation. Of course, I told them i sense and that you were as innocent as an old la you don't mind people talking. That's your shouldn't have been a good pal if I hadn't w people will talk, if they aren't talking already."

"You've got the mind of an usher," said J say worse than that of anybody. Wasn't it you a French governess should be given the fi Row and who laughed at me for being an old other prudish animal because I objected? If with a French governess, I can surely be trust

dential secretary. Besides, we're surrounded by an absolute *chevaux de frise* of chaperones, for I suppose that Hilda and Edith may fairly be considered efficient chaperones, even if you are still too youthfully Bohemian for the post."

Eleanor's age was the only vulnerable spot in her self-confidence, and John took advantage of it to bring her little chat to a bitter end.

"My dear Johnnie," she said tartly, "I'm not talking about the present. I'm warning you about the future. However, you're evidently not in the mood to listen to anybody."

"No, I'm not," he assented warmly. "I'm as deaf as an old adder."

The next day John together with Mrs. Worfolk and Maud left for Hampstead, and his secretary travelled with him up to town.

"Yes," his housekeeper was overheard observing to Elsa in the hall of 36 Church Row, "dogcart is a good name for such an unnatural conveyance, but give me a good old London cab for human beings. Turn again, Whittington, they say, and they're right. They may call London noisy if they like, but it's as quiet as a mouse when you put it alongside of all that baaing and mooing and cockadoodledoing in the country. Well, I mean to say, Elsa, I'm getting too old for the country. And the master's getting too old for the country in my opinion. I'm in hopes he'll settle down now, and not go wearing himself out any more with the country. Believe me or not as you will, Elsa, when I tell you that the pore fellow had to play at ball like any little kid to keep himself amused."

"Fancy that, Mrs. Worfolk," Elsa murmured with a gentle intake of astonished breath.

"Yes, it used to make me feel all over melancholy to see him. All by himself in a great field. Pore fellow. He's lonely, that's what it is. However . . ."

At this point the conversation born upon whispers and tut-tuts passed out of John's hearing toward the basement.

"I suppose my own servants will start gossiping next," he grumbled to himself. "Luckily I've learnt to despise gossip. Hullo, here's another bundle of press-cuttings.

"It is rumoured that John Touchwood's version of *Joan of Arc*

## Poor Relations

*which he is writing for that noble tragedienne Miss Bond will exhibit the Maid of Orleans in a new and piquant distinguished dramatist has just returned from France has been obtaining some startling scenic effects for which he is confidently expected will be the playwright's most successful. We are sorry to hear that Miss Bond has been suffering from a sharp attack of 'flu, but a visit to Dr. Brighton has*

These and many similar paragraphs were pasted in the album by his secretary the next morning, and John Bond was annoyed when she referred to them as worthless gossip.

"You don't know what gossip is," he said thinking of his wife.  
"I ignore real gossip."

Miss Hamilton smiled to herself.



### *Chapter Thirteen*

**A**FTER the Christmas party at Ambles John managed to secure a tranquillity that, however brief and deceptive he felt it was likely to be, nevertheless encouraged him sufficiently to make considerable progress with the play while it lasted. Perhaps Eleanor's warning had sunk deeper than she might have supposed from the apparent result of that little chat with her brother-in-law about his future; at any rate, he was so firmly determined not to give the most evil mind the least opportunity for malicious exaggeration that in self-defence he devoted to Joan of Arc a more exclusive attention than he had hitherto devoted to any of his dramatic personages. Moreover, in his anxiety to prove how abominably unjust the insinuations of his family were, he imparted to his heroine some of his own temporary remoteness from the ordinary follies and failings of humanity.

"We are too much obsessed by sex nowadays," he announced at the club one afternoon, and was tempted to expatiate upon his romantic shibboleth to several worn out old gentlemen who had assented to this proposition. "After all," he argued, "life is not all sex. I've lately been enormously struck by that in the course of my work. Take Joan of Arc for instance. Do we find any sex obsession in her? None. But is she less psychologically interesting on that account? No. Sex is the particular bane of modern writers. Frankly I cannot read a novel nowadays. I suppose I'm old-fashioned, but I'd rather be called old-fashioned than asked to appreciate one of these young modern writers. I suppose there's no man more willing than myself to march with the times, but I like the high roads of literature, not the muddy lanes. Look at Stevenson," the dramatist exclaimed. "When Stevenson wrote a love-scene he used to blush."

"So would anyone who had written love-scenes as bad as his," sniggered a young man, who seemed oblivious of his very recent election to the club.

The old members looked at him severely, not because he had



brought home to John the necessity of occupying himself immediately with his brother's future; at this rate he should find Hugh himself a member of his club before he knew what he was.

"I'm worrying about my young brother," he told Maud Hamilton next day, and looked at her sharply to watch the effect of this remark.

"Why, has he been misbehaving himself again?"

"No, not exactly misbehaving; but a friend of his has just been elected to my club, and I don't think it's good for Hugh to be hanging about in idleness. I do wish I could find the address of that man Raikes from British Honduras."

"Where is it likely to be?"

"It was a visiting-card. It might be anywhere."

"If it was a visiting-card, the most likely place to find it is in one of your waistcoat-pockets."

John regarded his secretary with the admiration that such a practical suggestion justified, and rang the bell.

"Maud, please bring down all my waistcoats," he told his valeting parlour-maid, who presently appeared in the library bowed down by a heap of clothes as a labourer is bowed down by a truss of hay.

In the twenty-seventh waistcoat that was examined the card was found:

*Mr. Sydney Ricketts.*

14 Lyonsse Road,  
Balham, S.W.

Belize,  
British Honduras.

"I thought his name was Raikes," John muttered indignantly.

"Never mind. A rose by any other name . . ." Miss Hamilton began.

John might almost have been said to interrupt what she was going to say with an angry glare; but she only laughed merrily at his fierce expression.

"Oh, I beg your pardon—I'd forgotten your objection to roses."

## *Poor Relations*

Mr. Ricketts, who was fortunately still in London on John's invitation to come and see him at Church business. He was a lantern-jawed man with a capacity for cocktails, a sinewy neck, and a sentiment for his native suburb. At the same time, he would say a word against British Honduras.

"I reckon our regatta at Belize is the prettiest in the world."

"But the future of logwood and mahogany?" John asked.

"Great," the visitor assured him. "Why don't you come out to us? You'd lose a lot of weight if you worked months up the Moho river. Here's a photograph of our boys loading logwood."

"They look very hot," said John politely.

"They are very hot," said Mr. Ricketts. "I expect to grow logwood in Iceland."

"No, of course not. I understand that."

"But when it gets too hot we retire to our retreat in the Cockscomb Mountains."

"They would certainly suit my brother," said John.

In the end it was decided that he should leave for the logwood and mahogany business and that in February Hugh should be ready to sail with Mr. Ricketts to Central America.

"Of course he'll want to learn something about the conditions of the trade at first. Yes, I reckon you'll stay in Belize at first," said the planter, scratching significantly that John made haste to fill up his glass to himself that, if the cocktails at the Belize Yard were as good as Mr. Ricketts boasted, Hugh would be able to see much more of mahogany than he saw of cut and rounded and polished to the shape of a room table. However, the more attractive Belize was than attractive England.

"I think you told me this was your first time in fifteen years?" he asked.

"That's right. Fifteen years in B.H."

"B.H.?" repeated the new speculator nervously.

"British Honduras."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. The initials associated themselves in my mind for the moment with another place. B.H. you call it? Very appropriate, I should think. I suppose you found many changes in Balham on your return?"

"Wouldn't have known it again," said Mr. Ricketts. "For one thing they'd changed all the lamp-posts along our road. That's the kind of thing to teach a man he's growing old."

Perhaps Hugh wouldn't recognize Hampstead after fifteen years, John thought gleefully; he might even pass his nearest relations in the street without a salute when like a Rip van Winkle of the tropics he returned to his native country after fifteen years.

"I suppose the usual outfit for hot climates will be necessary?"

Mr. Ricketts nodded; and John began to picture himself equipping Hugh from the Army and Navy Stores.

"I always think there is something extraordinarily romantic about a tropical outfit," he ventured.

"It's extraordinarily expensive," said Mr. Ricketts. "But everything's going up. And mahogany's going up when I get back to B.H., or my name isn't Sydney Ricketts."

"There's nothing you particularly recommend?"

"No, they'll tell you everything you want at the Stores and a bit over, except—oh yes, by the way, don't let him forget his shaker."

"Is that some special kind of porous overcoat?"

Mr. Ricketts laughed delightedly.

"Well, if that isn't the best thing I've heard since I was home. Porous overcoat! No, no, a shaker for mixing drinks."

"Humph!" John grunted. "From what I know of my brother, he won't require any special instrument for doing that. Good-bye, Mr. Ricketts; my solicitor will write to you about the business side. Good-bye."

When John went back to his work he was humming.

"Satisfactory?" his secretary enquired.

"Extremely satisfactory. I think Hugh is very lucky. Ricketts assures me that in another fifteen years—that is about the time Hugh will be wanting to visit England again—there is no reason why he shouldn't be making at least £500

## *Poor Relations*

a year. Besides, he won't be lonely, because I shall set out to British Honduras in another five years. It's a fascinating place if you're fond of natural history, the denizens apparently call it among themselves, pensively.

It could not be claimed that Hugh was enraptured at the prospect of leaving England in February, and John was really looking forward to the job of getting together. John was disappointed by his brother's lack of enthusiasm. John simply could not understand anybody's failure to be fascinated by snake-proof blankets and fever-proof filters, by medical and pith helmets and double-fly tents and all the paraphernalia of adventure in foreign parts. Finally he delivered his ultimatum to Hugh, which was accepted albeit with ill grace, hardening his heart against the crossed letters of post which arrived daily from his mother and burying himself in the Army and Navy Stores' catalogue, he was able to entrench himself in the opinion that he was doing the best that could be done in the circumstances. The worst of putting Hugh on his own was the resentment such a brotherly action aroused in other relations. After the quarrel with James he had expected to hear from him for a long time; but when he had the news about British Honduras gone the record was not so good. More family than his eldest brother wrote to ask him for a thousand pounds to invest in a projected critical weekly, which he was to be the editor. James added that John should hardly grudge him as much as that for log-rolling, when he was prepared to spend double that amount to roll logs abroad.

"I can't say I feel inclined to help James after this about my work," John observed to Miss Hamilton. "I hate critical weeklies."

It happened that the post next morning brought a cheque from his agent for royalties on various dramas. John saw that various theatres all over the world were playing to big houses. Confronted by this bright-hued token of prosperity John could not bring himself to sit down and pen a flat refusal to his brother's demand. Instead of doing that he merely wrote for a few hours the birth of a new critical weekly by

appointment to talk the matter over, and it was only a fleeting pleasure that he obtained from adding a postscript begging James not to bring his dog with him when he called at Church Row.

"For if that wretched animal goes snorting round the room all the time we're talking," he assured his secretary, "I shall agree to anything in order to get rid of it. I shall find all my available capital invested in critical weeklies just to save the carpet from being eaten."

James seemed to have entirely forgotten that his brother had any reason to feel sore with him; he also seemed entirely unconscious of there being the least likelihood of his refusing to finance the new venture. John, remembering how angry James had been when on a former occasion he had reminded him that Hugh's career was still before him, was careful to avoid the least suggestion of throwing cold water upon the scheme. Therefore in the circumstances James' unusual optimism, which lent his sallow cheeks some of the playwright's roses, was not surprising, and before the conversation had lasted many minutes John had half promised a thousand pounds. Having done this, he did try to retrieve the situation by advising James to invest it in railway-stock and argued strongly against the necessity of another journal.

"What are you going to call this further unnecessary burden upon our powers of assimilation?"

"I thought *The New Broom* would be a good title."

"Yes, I was positive you'd call it the new something-or-other. Why not *The New Way to pay Old Scores*? I'll back you to do that, even if you can't pay your old debts. However, listen to me. I'll lend the money to you personally. But I will not invest it in the paper. For security—or perhaps compensation would be a better word—you shall hand over to me the family portraits and the family silver."

"I'd rather it was a business proposition," James objected.

"My dear fellow, a new critical weekly can never be a business proposition. How many people read your books?"

"About a dozen," James calculated.

"Well, why should more people read your paper? No, you can have the money, but it must be regarded as a personal loan, and I must have the portraits and the silver."

## Poor Relations

"I don't see why you should have them."

"I don't see why you should start a new critical

John could not help enjoying the power that ambition had put in his hands and he insisted firm surrender of the heritage.

"All right, Jacob, I suppose I must sell my birthright mess of pottage."

"A printer's pie would describe it better," said

"Though why you want a few bad pictures or so forks and spoons, I can't conceive."

"Why do you want them?" John countered.

"Because they're mine."

"And the money is mine."

James went away with a cheque for a thousand in his pocket; but he went away less cheerful than John, on the other hand; was much impressed by the in which he had dealt with his eldest brother; it while losing a thousand pounds to have been able to state clearly to James once for all that his taste in literature at the mercy of the romanticism he so utterly despised while he felt that he had displayed a nice dignity in James to surrender the portraits and the silver, he pleasantly aware of an equally nice magnanimity willing to overlook that insulting article. But Miss was at his elbow to correct the slightest tendency to well pleased with himself.

"After all I couldn't disappoint poor old James," fishing for an encomium and dangling his own good the bait. His secretary, however, ignored the temptation and swam away into the deeps of romantic drama where munificence seemed less showy somehow.

"You know best what you *want* to do," she said "And now, have you decided upon this soliloquy for in her dungeon?"

"What do you feel about it?"

She held forth upon the advantages of a quiet front before the trial, and the author took her advice. He that she were as willing to descant upon his treatment of but he consoled himself for her lack of interest by saying



appointment to talk the matter over, and it was only a fleeting pleasure that he obtained from adding a postscript begging James not to bring his dog with him when he called at Church Row.

"For if that wretched animal goes snorting round the room all the time we're talking," he assured his secretary, "I shall agree to anything in order to get rid of it. I shall find all my available capital invested in critical weeklies just to save the carpet from being eaten."

James seemed to have entirely forgotten that his brother had any reason to feel sore with him; he also seemed entirely unconscious of there being the least likelihood of his refusing to finance the new venture. John, remembering how angry James had been when on a former occasion he had reminded him that Hugh's career was still before him, was careful to avoid the least suggestion of throwing cold water upon the scheme. Therefore in the circumstances James' unusual optimism, which lent his sallow cheeks some of the playwright's roses, was not surprising, and before the conversation had lasted many minutes John had half promised a thousand pounds. Having done this, he did try to retrieve the situation by advising James to invest it in railway-stock and argued strongly against the necessity of another journal.

"What are you going to call this further unnecessary burden upon our powers of assimilation?"

"I thought *The New Broom* would be a good title."

"Yes, I was positive you'd call it the new something-or-other. Why not *The New Way to pay Old Scores*? I'll back you to do that, even if you can't pay your old debts. However, listen to me. I'll lend the money to you personally. But I will not invest it in the paper. For security—or perhaps compensation would be a better word—you shall hand over to me the family portraits and the family silver."

"I'd rather it was a business proposition," James objected.

"My dear fellow, a new critical weekly can never be a business proposition. How many people read your books?"

"About a dozen," James calculated.

"Well, why should more people read your paper? No, you can have the money, but it must be regarded as a personal loan, and I must have the portraits and the silver."

## Poor Relations

"I don't see why you should have them."

"I don't see why you should start a new critical John could not help enjoying the power that ambition had put in his hands and he insisted firm surrender of the heritage.

"All right, Jacob, I suppose I must sell my bit of mess of pottage."

"A printer's pie would describe it better," said

"Though why you want a few bad pictures and or so forks and spoons, I can't conceive."

"Why do you want them?" John countered.

"Because they're mine."

"And the money is mine."

James went away with a cheque for a thousand in his pocket; but he went away less cheerful than John, on the other hand; was much impressed by in which he had dealt with his eldest brother; it while losing a thousand pounds to have been able to state clearly to James once for all that his taste in literature at the mercy of the romanticism he so utterly despised while he felt that he had displayed a nice dignity in James to surrender the portraits and the silver, he pleasantly aware of an equally nice magnanimity in willing to overlook that insulting article. But Miss I was at his elbow to correct the slightest tendency to well pleased with himself.

"After all I couldn't disappoint poor old James," fishing for an encomium and dangling his own good as the bait. His secretary, however, ignored the temptation and swam away into the deeps of romantic drama. His munificence seemed less showy somehow.

"You know best what you *want* to do," she said  
"And now, have you decided upon this soliloquy for in her dungeon?"

"What do you feel about it?"

She held forth upon the advantages of a quiet front before the trial, and the author took her advice. He that she were as willing to descant upon his treatment of, but he consoled himself for her lack of interest by sup

agreement to call the matter rest, and it was only a fleeting suggestion he obtained from adding a partner to keep James out of taking his dog with him when he called at Church Place.

"But if that was the animal you were talking round the room all the time you're talking," he warned his secretary, "I shall agree to anything in order to get rid of it. I shall find all my available capital invested in critical weeklies just to save the carpet from being eaten."

James seemed to have entirely forgotten that his brother had any reason to feel sore with him; he also seemed entirely unconscious of there being the least likelihood of his refusing to finance the new venture. John, remembering how angry James had been when on a former occasion he had reminded him that Hugh's career was still before him, was careful to avoid the least suggestion of throwing cold water upon the optimism, which lent his sallow cheeks some of the playefight's roses, was not surprising, and before the conversation had lasted many minutes John had half promised a thousand pounds. Having done this, he did try to relieve the situation by advising James to invest it in railway stock and argued strongly against the necessity of another journal.

"What are you going to call this further unnecessary burden upon our powers of assimilation?"

"I thought *The New Broom* would be a good title."

"Yes, I was positive you'd call it the new something-or-other. Why not *The New Way to pay Old Debts*? I'll back you to do that, even if you can't pay your old debts. However, listen to me. I'll lend the money to you personally. But I will not invest it in the paper. For security--or perhaps compensation would be a better word--you shall hand over to me the family portraits and the family silver."

"I'd rather it was a business proposition," James objected.

"My dear fellow, a new critical weekly can never be a business proposition. How many people read your books?"

"About a dozen," James calculated.

"Well, why should more people read your paper? No, you can have the money, but it must be regarded as a personal loan and I must have the portraits and the silver."

## Poor Relations

"I don't see why you should have them."

"I don't see why you should start a new critical

John could not help enjoying the power that his ambition had put in his hands and he insisted firmly on surrender of the heritage.

"All right, Jacob, I suppose I must sell my birthright for a mess of pottage."

"A printer's pie would describe it better," said John.

"Though why you want a few bad pictures and a few forks and spoons, I can't conceive."

"Why do you want them?" John countered.

"Because they're mine."

"And the money is mine."

James went away with a cheque for a thousand pounds in his pocket; but he went away less cheerful than John, on the other hand; was much impressed by the result in which he had dealt with his eldest brother; it was a while losing a thousand pounds to have been able to state clearly to James once for all that his taste in literature was at the mercy of the romanticism he so utterly despised, while he felt that he had displayed a nice dignity in refusing to surrender the portraits and the silver, he was pleasantly aware of an equally nice magnanimity on the part of John, willing to overlook that insulting article. But Miss Gresham was at his elbow to correct the slightest tendency to self-complacency, and he was well pleased with himself.

"After all I couldn't disappoint poor old James, who was fishing for an encomium and dangling his own good name as bait. His secretary, however, ignored the temptation and swam away into the deeps of romantic drama, and his munificence seemed less showy somehow."

"You know best what you *want* to do," she said.  
"And now, have you decided upon this soliloquy in her dungeon?"

"What do you feel about it?"

She held forth upon the advantages of a quiet life before the trial, and the author took her advice. He felt that she were as willing to descant upon his treatment, but he consoled himself for her lack of interest by

that she was diffident about giving the least colour to any suggestion that she might be influencing him to her own advantage.

Hugh came up to town in order to go more fully into the question of his future, and John regarding Miss Hamilton's attitude towards him tried to feel perfectly sure that she was going out of her way to be pleasant to Hugh solely with an idea of accentuating the strictly professional side of her association with himself. If this were not the case, he should be justified in thinking that she did really like Hugh very much, which would be an uncomfortable state of affairs. Still, explain it away as he might, John did feel a little uneasy, and once when he heard of a visit to the theatre preceded by dinner he was upon the verge of pointing out to Hugh that until he was definitely established in mahogany and logwood he must be extremely careful about raising false hopes. He managed to refrain from approaching Hugh on the subject, because he knew that if he betrayed the least anxiety in that direction Hugh was capable of making it a matter for public jest. He decided instead to sound Miss Hamilton upon her views.

"You've never had any longing for the tropics?" he asked, as casually as he was able.

"Not particularly, though of course I should enjoy any fresh experience."

"I was noticing the other day that you seemed to dislike spiders; and, of course, the spiders in hot countries are terrible. I remember reading of some that snare birds, and I'm not sure that in parts of South America they don't even attack human beings. Many people of course do not mind them. For instance, my brother-in-law Daniel Curtis wrote a very moving account of a spider as large as a bat, with whom he fraternized on the banks of the Orinoco. It's quite a little classic in its way."

John noted with the warmest satisfaction that Miss Hamilton shuddered.

"Your poor brother," she murmured.

"Oh, he'll be all right," said John hurriedly. "I'm equipping him with every kind of protection against insects. Only yesterday I discovered a most ingenious box which is guaranter-

## Poor Relations

to keep one's tobacco from being devoured, and I thought Hugh looked very well in his you?"

"I'm afraid I really didn't notice," Mr. Bond said indifferently.

Soon after this conversation James' birth surrendered, and John gave up contemplating a peak in Darien in order to contemplate his own an ancient and distinguished family. While being hung in the library he discoursed upon lineage so volubly that he had a sudden dread taking him for a snob, which he tried to counteract by the mouth of Joan of Arc sententious demophilism.

"I shall aim at getting the first draft of my book by April 1st—my birthday by the way. You see, it's three. And then I thought we might go in at finishing entirely by the end of June. Miss Bond to produce in September with the rehearsals. *Lucretia* will be produced over the winter. I think it would be rather jolly to finish off with a tour to Domrèmy, Bourges, Chinon, Orleans, Combray, a delightful tour. You could have an excellent writer . . ."

John's dreams of literature and life in France were interrupted by Mrs. Worfolk, who entered the room and put upon her lips.

"There's the Reverend Armitage waiting in the hall, sir. But he was looking so queer that I don't know if I ought to admit him or not. It was a bit awkward to open the door. Well, I mean to say, he was in her rooms, and Elsa was a bit frightened with her through her being engaged to a policeman running on murders and such like. Of course it was the Reverend Armitage I quieted her. He really does look most peculiar, if you'll pardon me on Mrs. Armitage's husband. I don't think he's barmy yet; but you know, he gives anyone a bit of a shock soon, and I thought you ought to be told."

rave up and down the house. He's got a very funny look in his eye, the same as what a man once had who sat opposite me in a bus and five minutes afterwards jumped off on Hammer-smith Bridge and threw himself into the river. Quite a sensation it created, I remember, and we all had to alight, so as the conductor could give what information he had to a policeman who'd only heard the splash."

Mrs. Worfolk had been too garrulous; before she had time to ascertain her master's views on the subject of admitting Laurence there was a tap at the door, and Laurence himself stalked into the room. Unquestionably, even to one who had not known him as a clergyman, he did present an odd appearance with his fur-lined cloak of voluminous black, his long hair, his bundle of manuscript and theatrical newspapers, and his tragic eye; the only article of attire that had survived his loss of faith was the clergyman's hat; but even that had lost its former meekness and now gave the effect of a *farouche* sombrero.

"Well met," he intoned, advancing solemnly into the room and gripping his brother-in-law's hand with dramatic effect. "I would have converse with you, John."

"That's a blank verse line," said John. There really was not much else that he could have said to such an affected greeting.

"Probably, probably," Laurence muttered, shaking his head. "It's difficult for me to talk in prose nowadays. But I have news for you, John, good news. *Thomas* is finished."

"You needn't wait, Mrs. Worfolk," said John.

His housekeeper was standing by the door with a face wreathed in notes of interrogation and seemed unwilling to retire.

"You needn't wait, Mrs. Worfolk," he repeated irritably.

"I thought you might have been wanting somebody fetched, sir."

John made an impatient gesture and Mrs. Worfolk vanished.

"You know Miss Hamilton, Laurence," said John severely.

"Ah, Miss Hamilton! Forgive my abstraction. How d'ye do? But—ah—I was anxious to have a few words in private."

"Miss Hamilton is my confidential secretary."

## Poor Relations

"I bow to your domestic arrangements," said  
"But—ah—my business is of an extremely private nature. It bears in fact directly upon my future."

John was determined to keep his secretary in the house. He had a feeling that money was going to be asked for, and he hoped that her presence would encourage him to stand against agreeing to lend it.

"If you have anything to say to me, Laurence, say it in front of my secretary. I cannot be shooing her from the room like a troublesome cat."

The ex-vicar looked awkward for a moment; but conceit reasserted itself and flinging back his chair upon the table a manuscript.

"Fresh from Miss Quirk's typewriting office here he announced. "And now, my dear fellow, I require your good advice." There was flowing into his voice a professionalunction of the clergyman with a north transept. "Who was it that first said 'Charity begins at home?' a little good advice about my play. In deference to my Chamberlain while reserving to my conscience the right to execrate his despotism I have expunged from my central figures of the gospel story, and I venture to say that there is now no reason why *Thomas* should not be produced."

"I'm afraid I can't invite you to read it to me just now, Laurence," said John hurriedly. "No, not just now. I'm afraid. When I'm working myself I'm always being exposed to outside influences. *You* wouldn't you shouldn't like to find in *Joan of Arc* echoes of *Thomas* Hamilton, however, who is thoroughly conventional in point of view, would perhaps . . ."

"I confess," Laurence interrupted loftily, "that I set much store by its being read. No, no. You will not be of undue self-esteem, my dear fellow, if I say at once with modesty that I am satisfied with my labours, though you may be a little alarmed when I confide in you my opinion of it, probably a classic. Still, such is my deliberate opinion. Moreover, I have already allowed our little party to hear it. Yes, we spent a memorable evening"



manuscript was despatched to Miss Quirk. Some of the scenes, indeed, proved almost too dramatic. Edith was quite exhausted by her emotion and scarcely slept all night. As for Hilda, I've never seen her so overcome by anything. She couldn't say anything when I finished. No, no, I shan't read it to you. In fact, to be—ah—blunt, I could scarcely endure the strain a second time. No, what I want you to do, my dear fellow, is to—ah—back it. The phrase is Hugh's. We have all been thrilled down at Ambles by rumours of your generosity, and I know you'll be glad of another medium for exercising it. Am I unduly proud of my work if I say that it seems to me a more worthy medium than British Honduras or weekly papers?"

John had been gazing at Miss Hamilton with a mute appeal to save him while his brother-in-law was talking; she, however, bending lower every moment to hide her mirth made no attempt to show him a way of escape and John had to rely upon his own efforts.

"Wouldn't it be better," he suggested mildly, "to submit your play to a manager before we—before you try to put it on yourself? I have never invested any money in my own plays, and really I . . ."

"My dear John, far be it from me to appear to cast the least slur—to speak in the faintest way at all slightly of your plays—but I do not quite see the point of the comparison. Your plays—excellent as they are, most excellent—are essentially commercial transactions. My play is not a commercial transaction."

"Then why should I be invited to lose my money over it?"

Laurence smiled compassionately.

"I thought you would be glad of the opportunity to show a disinterested appreciation of art. In years to come you will be proud to think that you were one of the first to give practical evidence of your belief in *Thomas*."

"But perhaps I'm just as sceptical as your hero was. I may not believe in your play's immortality."

Laurence frowned.

"Come, my dear fellow, this is being petty. We are all counting on you. You wouldn't like to hear it said that on of jealousy you had tried to suppress a rival dramatist. Bu

## Poor Relations

I must not let my indignation run away with me. I must forgive my heat. I am overstrained. The subject of the subject has almost been too much for me. I should have explained at once that I intended to give *Thomas* all that is left of my own little capital. Yes, I am ready to do that. Then I shall spend a year as an actor, in which I shall indulge my more worldly self by writing frankly commercial plays before I begin my next grandly entitled *Paul*."

John decided that his brother-in-law had gone mad. He did not think of any action more effective at such a crisis than to ring the bell. But when Maud came to enquire his reason, he did not devise anything to tell her except that Mr. Arthur was staying to lunch.

It was a most uncomfortable meal, because Miss Maud, in order to keep herself from laughing aloud had to keep her face as naturally grave, and John himself was in a condition of nervous irritation at Laurence, who would let his fork on his plate grow cold while he droned on without pause about the simplicity of the best art. It was more mortifying to watch him gradually build up a mouthful with the fork, still talking; slowly raise it to his lips, still talking, and wave the overloaded fork to and fro before him, still talking. But it was an agony to watch the carefully accumulated mouthful drop back bit by bit upon his plate, until at last, slowly and still talking he would insert one cold morsel into his patient mouth, so tiny a morsel that the attention of it did not prevent him from still talking.

"I'm afraid you're not enjoying your lunch," his brother-in-law said.

"Don't wait for me, my dear fellow; when I am engaged in something else I cannot gobble my food. Though in this case," he added in a resigned voice, "I shall have to wait. One cannot write plays like *Thomas* without exposing oneself to the ills that flesh is heir to."

After lunch, much to John's relief, his brother-in-law announced that he had an appointment with Eleanor and would therefore be unable to stay even long enough to smoke.

"Yes," he said. "Eleanor and I are going to interview two or three of her theatrical friends. No doubt I shall

able to proclaim myself a rogue and a vagabond. Yes, yes, poor Edith was quite distressed this morning when I told her that jestingly. However, she will be happy to hear to-night when I get back that her brother has been so large."

"Eh?"

"Not that Edith expected him to be otherwise. No, no, my dear fellow, Edith has a most exalted opinion of you, which indeed I share, if I may be permitted so to do. Good-bye, John, and many thanks. Who knows? Our little lunch may become a red-letter day in the calendar of English dramatic art. Let me see, the tube-station is on the left as I go out? Good-bye John; I wish I could stay the night with you, but I have a cheap day-ticket which forbids any extension of my plans."

When John got back to the library he turned in bewilderment to his secretary.

"Look here. I surely never gave him the least idea that I was going to back his confounded play, did I?"

"On the contrary, you made it perfectly clear that you were not."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, because he has gone away from here apparently under the delusion that I am. He'll brag about it to Eleanor this afternoon, and before I know where I am she will be asking me to set George up with a racing-stable."

Eleanor did not go as far as that, but she did write to John and point out that the present seemed a suitable moment to deal with the question of George's health by sending him on a voyage round the world. She added that for herself she asked nothing; but John had an uneasy impression that it was only in the belief that by asking nothing she expected to get more than anybody else.

"Take down two letters, please, Miss Hamilton," he said grimly.

*Dear Laurence,*

*I am afraid that you went away yesterday afternoon under a misapprehension. I do not see my way to offer any financial contribution toward the production of your play.*

## Poor Relations

myself passed a long apprenticeship before I was able of my plays acted, and I do not think that you can be otherwise. Do not imagine that I am casting any doubt on the excellence of "Thomas." If it is as good as you claim, have your reward without any help from me. Your idea of being acquainted with the practical side of the stage is a good one. If you are not already engaged in the autumn, I think you would be one of the minor bishops in "Joan of Arc."

Your affectionate brother

Dear Eleanor,

I must say decidedly that I do not perceive any benefit of George's health deriving much benefit from a voyage to a foreign world. If he is threatened with sleeping sickness, it would be to expose him to a tropical climate. If he is suffering from a sluggish liver, he will get no benefit from lolling about in saloons, whatever the latitude and longitude. I have helped George with his schemes to earn a living for himself, but he has never failed to squander my money upon capricious projects. You know that I am always willing to come forward for Bertram and Viola; but their father must show signs of improvement before I do anything more for him. I am sorry I cannot offer you a good part in "Joan of Arc"; there is nothing to suit you, for I presume you would not care to play the part of Joan's mother. However, it has now been decided to produce "Lucretia" in April and I shall do my best to get Grohmann to offer you a part in that.

Your affectionate brother

John did not receive an answer to either of these letters. Out of an atmosphere of pained silence he managed to form optimistically an idea that Laurence and Eleanor had accepted the justice of his point of view.

"You do agree with me that they were going to leave," he asked Miss Hamilton; but she declined to give her opinion.

"What's the good of having a confidential secretary if I can't ask her advice about confidential matters?" he

able to proclaim myself a rogue and a vagabond. Yes, yes, poor Edith was quite distressed this morning when I told her that jestingly. However, she will be happy to hear to-night when I get back that her brother has been so large."

"Eh?"

"Not that Edith expected him to be otherwise. No, no, my dear fellow, Edith has a most exalted opinion of you, which indeed I share, if I may be permitted so to do. Good-bye, John, and many thanks. Who knows? Our little lunch may become a red-letter day in the calendar of English dramatic art. Let me see, the tube-station is on the left as I go out? Good-bye John; I wish I could stay the night with you, but I have a cheap day-ticket which forbids any extension of my plans."

When John got back to the library he turned in bewilderment to his secretary.

"Look here. I surely never gave him the least idea that I was going to back his confounded play, did I?"

"On the contrary, you made it perfectly clear that you were not."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, because he has gone away from here apparently under the delusion that I am. He'll brag about it to Eleanor this afternoon, and before I know where I am she will be asking me to set George up with a racing-stable."

Eleanor did not go as far as that, but she did write to John and point out that the present seemed a suitable moment to deal with the question of George's health by sending him on a voyage round the world. She added that for herself she asked nothing; but John had an uneasy impression that it was only in the belief that by asking nothing she expected to get more than anybody else.

"Take down two letters, please, Miss Hamilton," he said grimly.

*Dear Laurence,*

*I am afraid that you went away yesterday afternoon under a misapprehension. I do not see my way to offer any financial contribution toward the production of your play. I*

## Poor Relations

myself passed a long apprenticeship before I was able of my plays acted, and I do not think that you can otherwise. Do not imagine that I am casting any doubt on the excellence of "Thomas." If it is as good as you claim, you will have your reward without any help from me. Your idea of being acquainted with the practical side of the stage is a good one, if you are not already engaged in the autumn, I think you are one of the minor bishops in "Joan of Arc."

Your affectionate brother,

Dear Eleanor,

I must say decidedly that I do not perceive any benefit of George's health deriving much benefit from a voyage to a foreign world. If he is threatened with sleeping sickness, it would be to expose him to a tropical climate. If he is suffering from a sluggish liver, he will get no benefit from lolling about in the saloons, whatever the latitude and longitude. I have helped George with his schemes to earn a living for himself, but he has never failed to squander my money upon capricious projects. You know that I am always willing to come forward for Bertram and Viola; but their father must show signs of improvement himself before I do anything more for him. I am sorry I cannot offer you a good part in "Joan of Arc"; there is nothing to suit you, for I presume you would not care to play the part of Joan's mother. However, it has now been decided to produce "Lucretia" in April and I shall do my best to induce Grobmann to offer you a part in that.

Your affectionate brother-

John did not receive an answer to either of these letters, and out of an atmosphere of pained silence he managed to extract optimistically an idea that Laurence and Eleanor had accepted the justice of his point of view.

"You do agree with me that they were going to leave," he asked Miss Hamilton; but she declined to give her opinion.

"What's the good of having a confidential secretary if I can't ask her advice about confidential matters?" he asked.

"Are you dissatisfied with me?"

"No, no, no. I'm not dissatisfied. What an exaggeration of my remark! I'm simply a little puzzled by your attitude. It seems to me—I may be wrong—that instead of . . . well, at first you were always perfectly ready to talk about my relations and about me, whereas now you won't talk about anything except *Joan of Arc*. I'm really getting quite bored with *Joan of Arc*."

"I was only an amateur when I began," she laughed. "Now I'm beginning to be professional."

"I think it's a great mistake," said John decidedly. "Suppose I insisted upon having your advice?"

"You'd find that dictation bears two meanings in English, to only one of which are you entitled under the terms of our contract."

"Look here, have I done anything to offend you?" he asked pathetically.

But she would not be moved and held her pencil so conspicuously ready that the author was impaled upon it before he could escape and was soon hard at work dictating his first arrangement of the final scene in a kind of indignant absent-mindedness.

Soon after this John received a note from Sir Percy Mortimer, asking if he could spare time to visit the great actor-manager some evening in the course of the current week. Between nine-thirty and ten was indicated as a suitable time, inasmuch as Sir Percy would then be in his dressing-room gathering the necessary momentum to knock down all the emotional fabric carefully built up in the first two acts by the most cunning of contemporary dramatists. Sir Percy Mortimer, whose name was once Albert Snell, could command anybody, so it ought not to have been remarkable that John rather flustered by the invitation made haste to obey it. Yet, he must have been aware of an implied criticism in Miss Hamilton's smile, which flashed across her still deep eyes like a sunny wind, for he murmured apologetically:

"We poor writers of plays must always wait upon our masters."

He tried to convey that Sir Percy was only a mortal like

## *Poor Relations*

himself, but he failed somehow to eliminate the disrespect, almost it might be called awe of the actor perceptible under the assumed carelessness of the audience.

"You see, it may be that he is anxious to hear some plans for the near future," he added.

If Sir Percy Mortimer was impressive in the smugness of the Thespian Club as himself, he was dumbfounded in the dressing-room as Lord Claridge, the ambassador, about Princess Thingumabobski's salon where with diplomacy and smiles he would settle the future of several countries and incidentally secure for himself the heart and hand of a heiress. His evening-dress had achieved an immaculate finish even Ouida never dreamed of; he wore the Grand Victorian Order with as easy an assurance as his father wore the insignia of a local friendly society in Birmingham. He was the quintessential diplomat of girlish dreams, and it was not surprising that women were ready to remove even their shoes to see him perform at matinees.

"Ah, it's very good of you to look me up, my dear fellow. I have just a quarter-of-an-hour. Godfrey!" He addressed his valet, who might have been a cardinal during an ecclesiastical crisis like the spread of Modernism into the theatre upon an actor.

"Sir Percy?"

"I do not wish to be disturbed until I am ready for the third act."

"Very good, Sir Percy."

"And Godfrey!"

"Sir Percy?"

"The whisky and soda for Mr. Touchwood. Godfrey!"

"Sir Percy?"

"If the Duke of Shropshire comes behind, tell him that I am unavoidably prevented from seeing him until the third act. I will *not* be interrupted."

"No, Sir Percy. I quite understand, Sir Percy."

The valet set the decanter at John's elbow and disappeared like the ghost of a king.

"It's just this, my dear fellow," the actor-man



when John who had been trying to decide whether he should suggest Peter the Great or Augustus the Strong as the next part for his host was inclining towards Augustus. "It's just this. I believe that Miss Cartright, a former member of my company, is *also* a relation of yours."

"She is my sister-in-law," admitted John, swallowing both Peter and Augustus in a disappointed gulp.

"In fact, I believe that in private life she is Mrs. George Touchwood. Correct me if I am wrong in my names."

Sir Percy waited, but John did not avail himself of the offer, and he went on.

"Well, my dear fellow, she has approached me upon a matter which I confess I have found somewhat embarrassing, referring as it does to another man's private affairs; but as one of the—as—how shall I describe myself?—" He fingered the ribbon of the Victorian Order for inspiration. "As an actor-manager of some standing, I felt that you would prefer me to hear what she had to say in order that I might thereby adjudicate—yes, I think that is the word—without any—no, forgive me—adjudicate is *not* the word. Adjudicate is too strong. What is the word for outsiders of standing who are called in to assist at the settlement of a trade dispute? Whatever the word is, that is the word I want. I understand from Miss Cartright—Mrs. George Touchwood in private life—that her husband is in a very grave state of health and entirely without means." Sir Percy looked at himself in the glass and dabbed his face with the powder-puff. "Miss Cartright asked me to use my influence with you to take some steps to mitigate this unpleasant situation upon which, it appears, people are beginning to comment rather unfavourably. Now, you and I, my dear fellow, are members of the same club. You and I have high positions in our respective professions. Is it wise? There may of course be a thousand reasons for leaving your brother to starve with an incurable disease. But is it wise? As a man of the world, I think not." He touched his cheeks with the hare's-foot and gave them a richer bloom. "Don't allow me to make any suggestion that even borders upon the impertinent, but if you care to accept my mediation—that is the word I couldn't remember." In his enthusiasm Sir Percy smacked his leg,

## Poor Relations

which caused him a momentary anxiety for the position of his trousers. "Mediation! Of course, that's it—as I say, to accept my mediation I am willing to make any sacrifice."

John stared at the actor-manager in angry amazement, and then he let himself go:

"My brother is not starving—he eats more than any man being I know. Nor is he suffering from anything except laziness. I do not wish to discuss with you or with any other person else the affairs of my relations, which I regret to say are in most cases only too much my own affairs."

"Then there is nothing for me to do," Sir Percy said, deriving what consolation he could from being unable to improve a single detail of his dress that could be improved.

"Nothing whatever," John agreed emphatically.

"But what shall I say to Miss Cartright, who you remember is a former member of my company, as well as my sister-in-law?"

"I leave that to you."

"It's very awkward," Sir Percy murmured. "I am sure you would be sure to see that it is always better to settle unpleasant matters—out of court, if I may use the expression. I'm so afraid that Miss Cartright will air her grievance."

"She can wash as much dirty linen as she likes and every day in your theatre," said John fiercely. "But my brother George shall *not* go on a voyage round the world. You've nothing else to ask me? Nothing about my plans for the near future?"

"No, no. I've a success, as you know, and I don't expect I shall want another play for months. You've seen my performance, of course?"

"No," said John curtly, "I've not."

And when he left the actor-manager's dressing-room he knew that he had wounded him more deeply by that simple negative than by all the mighty insults imaginable.

Notwithstanding his successful revenge John left the theatre in a rage and went off to his club with the hope of finding a sympathetic listener into whose ears he could pour the tale of Sir Percy's megalomania; but by ill luck there was nobody suitable in the smoking-room that night. To be sure,

Sir Philip Cranbourne was snoring in an armchair, and Sir Philip Cranbourne was perhaps a bigger man in the profession than Sir Percy Mortimer. Yet, he was not so much bigger but that he would have welcomed a tale against the younger theatrical knight whose promotion to equal rank with himself he had resented very much. Sir Philip, however, was fast asleep, and John doubted if he hated Sir Percy sufficiently to welcome being woken up to hear a story against him—particularly a story by a playwright, one of that miserable class for which Sir Philip as an actor had naturally a very profound contempt. Moreover, thinking the matter over, John came to the conclusion that the story, while it would tell against Sir Percy would also tell against himself, and he decided to say nothing about it. When he was leaving the club he ran into Mr. Winnington-Carr, who greeted him airily.

“Evening, Touchwood!”

“Good evening.”

“What’s this I hear about Hugh going to Sierra Leone? Bit tough, isn’t it, sending him over to a plague spot like that? You saw that paragraph in *The Penguin*? Things we should like to know, don’t you know? *Why John Touchwood’s brother is taking up a post in the tropics and whether John himself is really sorry to see him go.*”

“No, I did not see that paragraph,” said John icily.

Next morning a bundle of press-cuttings arrived.

“There is nothing here but stupid gossip,” said John to his secretary, flinging the packet into the fire. “Nothing that is worth preserving in the album, I mean to say.”

Miss Hamilton smiled to herself.



their treatment at a birth. Had a baby arrived upstairs, they would have been hustled out of sight and sound of the unclean event; but over death they were expected to gloat, and their curiosity was encouraged as the fit expression of filial piety.

"Yes, Frida darling, dear Grandmama will have lots and lots of lovely white flowers. Don't kick the table, sweetheart. Think of dear Grandmama looking down at you from Heaven, and don't kick the table-leg, my precious," said Edith in tremulous accents, gently smoothing back her daughter's indefinite hair.

"Can people only see from Heaven or can they hear?" asked Harold.

"Hush, my boy," his uncle Laurence interposed. "These are mysteries into which God does not permit us to enquire too deeply. Let it suffice that our lightest actions are known. We cannot escape the omniscient eye."

"I wasn't asking about God," Harold objected. "I was asking about Grandmama. Does she hear Frida kicking the table, or does she only see her?"

"At this solemn moment, Harold, when we should all of us be dumb with grief, you should not persist. Your poor grandmother would be pained to hear you being persistent like this."

Harold seemed to think he had tricked his uncle into answering the question, for he relapsed into a satisfied silence; Edith's eyes flashed gladly through her tears to welcome the return of her husband's truant orthodoxy. All managed to abstain while they were eating from any more conspicuous intrusion of the flesh than was inevitable; but there was a painful scene after supper, because Frida insisted that she was frightened to sleep alone and refused to be comforted by the offer of Viola for company. The terrible increase of Grandmama's powers of hearing and seeing might extend to new powers of locomotion in the middle of the night, in which case Viola would be no protection.

"But Grandmama is in Heaven, darling," her mother urged.

"I want to sleep with you. I'm frightened. I want to sleep with you," she wailed.

"Laurence!" murmured Edith appealingly.

## *Poor Relations*

"Death is a great leveller," he intoned. Grateful chance of being able to make this observation, he occupied his daughter's room and thereby allowed her to occupy his daughter's room and thereby allow her to stay with her mother.

"You're looking sad, Bertram," John observed to his favourite nephew. "You mustn't take this too to heart."

"No, Uncle John, I'm not. Only I keep wishing George had lived a little longer."

"We all wish that, old man."

"Yes, but I only meant a very little longer, so that I might have gone back for the first week of term."

John nervously hurried his nephew up to bed to escape the scorching of Laurence's rekindled flames of belief. On the stairs, he tried to extract from the attitude of the other members of the family the attitude he would have detected in himself. If a few months ago John had known that his mother's death would affect him so little, he would have been horrified by the suggestion; even now he was seriously shocked at himself. Yet, try as he might, he could not achieve the apotheosis of the old lady that he would have been so content to achieve. Undoubtedly a few months ago he would have been able without being conscious of it to pretend that he believed not only in the reality of his own grief, but also in that of the others. He had not taken his part in the utterance of platitudes about death, separation and reunion. His own platitudes would have been disguised with poetic tropes, and he might have said to himself how well such and such a phrase was put, and how it would quickly have assured himself that it was so because it was the just expression of a deep emotion. He could not make a single contribution to the woefulness of those round him. He believed neither in himself nor in them. He knew that George was faintly anxious to take off his top-hat, that Hilda was agitated at the prospect of having to explain to James and Beatrice her unintentional slight to Laurence, that Laurence was unable to resist the opportunity of leading at this sorrowful time by reverting to his priestly duties. And Hugh, for whom the old lady had always possessed

unreasoning affection, did his countenance express more than a hardly concealed relief that it was all over? Did he not give the impression that he was stretching his legs after sitting still in one position for too long? Edith, to be sure, was feeling some kind of emotion that required an endless flow of tears, but it seemed to John that she was weeping more for the coming of death than for the going of her mother. And the children, how could they be expected to feel the loss of the old lady? There under the lamp like a cenotaph recording the slow hours of age stood her patience-cards in their red morocco case; there they would be allowed to stand for a while to satisfy a brief craving for reverence, and then one of the children realizing that Grandmama had no more need of playing would take possession of them; they would become grubby and dog's-eared in younger hands; they would disappear one by one, and the memory of that placid presence would hardly outlive them.

"It's so nice to think that her little annuity died with her," sighed Edith. She spoke of the annuity as if it were a favourite pug that had died out of sympathy with its mistress. "I should hate to feel I was benefiting from the death of somebody I loved," she explained presently.

John shivered; that remark of his sister's was like a ghostly footstep upon his own grave, and from a few years hence, perhaps much less, he seemed to hear the family lawyer cough before he settled himself down to read the last will and testament of John Touchwood.

"Of course, poor Mama had been dreadfully worried these last weeks," Hilda said. "She felt very much the prospect of Hugh's going abroad—and other things."

John regarded his elder sister, and was on the point of asking what she meant to insinuate by other things, when a lament from upstairs startled the assembled family.

"Come to bed, mother, come to bed, I want you," Frida was shrieking over the balustrade. "The door of Grandmama's room made a noise just now."

"You had better go," said Laurence in answer to his wife's unvoiced appeal; and Edith went off gratefully.

"It will always be a consolation to me," said Laurence,

## Poor Relations

"that Mama was able to hear *Thomas* read to her. she was so well upon that memorable evening. So v By the way, John, I shall arrange with the Vicar to burial service myself. It will add a last touch to the of our common grief."

In his own room that night John tried hard not to anybody except himself. It was he who was cynical, he hard, he who was unnatural, not they. He tried to cv the past early memories of his mother without being recall one that might bring a tear to his eye. He r " that once she had smacked him for something George t that she had never realized what a success he had ma life's work, that she was—but he tore the unfilial thora his brain and reminded himself how much of her p endured in his own. George, Edith and himself a her: James, Hilda and Hugh resembled their father brothers and sisters haunted the darkness; he ' deep down in himself he blamed his father and m bringing them all into the world; he could not be that he ought to have been an only child.

"I do resent their existence," John thought. heartless egotist. And Miss Hamilton thinks I'm a Her manner towards me lately has been distant, temptuous. Could that suggestion of Hilda's have truth in it? Was Mama worried to death by H. abroad? Did James complain to her about my + portraits and the silver? Is it from any standpoint c that my own behaviour did hasten her end?"

John's self-reproaches were magnified in the dar he spent a restless and unhappy night, trying to thin family was more important than the individual.

"You feel it terribly, don't you, dear Johnnie asked him next morning with an affectionate pr his arm. "You're looking quite worn out."

"We all feel it terribly," he sighed.

During the three days before the funeral John work himself up into a condition of sentimentality flattered himself was outwardly at any rate affecting. ous reminders of his mother's existence culmina



arrival of a new cap she had ordered just before her last swift illness seemed to induce in him the illusion of sorrow; and without the least idea of what he intended to do with them afterward he collected a quantity of small relics like spectacle-cases and caps and mittens, which he arranged upon his dressing-table and brooded over with brimming eyes. He indulged Harold's theories about the psychical state of his grandmother; he practised swinging a golf club, but he never once took out a ball; he treated everybody to magnificent wreaths, and presented the servants as well as his nephews and nieces with mourning; he ordered black-edged note-paper; he composed an epitaph in the manner of Sir Thomas Browne with cadences and subtle alliterations. Then came the funeral, which ruined the last few romantic notions of grief that he had been able to preserve.

To begin with, Beatrice arrived in what could only be described as a towering rage: no less commonplace epithet would have done justice to the vulgarity of her indignation. That James the eldest son and she his wife should not have been notified of the dangerous condition of Mama, but should have been summoned to the obsequies like mere friends of the family had outraged her soul, or, as Beatrice herself put it, had knocked her down like a feather. Oh yes, she had always been considered beneath the Touchwood standard of gentility, but poor Mama had not thought the worse of her for that; poor Mama had many times gone out of her way to be specially gracious towards her; poor Mama must have 'laid' there wondering why her eldest daughter-in-law did not come to give her the last and longest farewell. She had not been lucky enough to be blessed with children, but poor Mama had sometimes congratulated her upon that fact; poor Mama had realized only too well that children were not always a source of happiness. She knew that the undeserved poverty which had always dogged poor old Jimmie's footsteps had lately caused to be exacted from him the family portraits and the family silver pressed upon him by poor Mama herself; but was that a reason for excluding him from his mother's death-bed? She would not say whom she blamed, but she had her own ideas, and though Hilda might protest it was her fault,

## *Poor Relations*

she knew better; Hilda was incapable of such barbarity. She would *not* walk beside James as wife of the bride; she would follow in the rear of the funeral procession; that at any rate she was not grudging that humble duty. Some people resented her having bought the laurels from a very expensive flower-shop, she was not to carry the wreath herself; she had carried it all the way in town first-class to avoid its being crushed by heavy-class passengers.

"And when I die," sobbed Beatrice, "I hope you will remember we weren't allowed to see poor Papa when she went to Heaven, and will let me die quite alone. I don't want my death to interfere with other people's arrangements."

The funeral party gathered round the open grave; the minister read the service so slowly and the wind was so raw that it was depicted upon every countenance; the minister's nose, above which rose Beatrice's sobs of mortification, mingled with the sighing of the yews and the wheezing of the asthmatics in a suitably lachrymose symphony.

"Now that poor Mama has gone," said Hilda to Beatrice that afternoon, "I daresay you're anxious for me to go too."

"I really don't think you are entitled to ascribe to unnatural sentiments," John expostulated. "Why should I want you to die?"

He could indeed ask this, for such an event would connote his adoption of Harold.

"I didn't mean you wanted me to die," said Beatrice. "I meant you would like me to leave Ambles."

"Not at all. I'm delighted for you to stay here as it suits your convenience. And that applies equally to George. Also I may say to George," he added with a glance at George who had taken the opportunity of mourning to equip himself with a new set of black bearskin furs. Eleanor shook her head like a large animal emerging from the stream.

"And to me?" she asked with a challenge in her eyes.

"You must judge for yourself, Eleanor, how far your hospitality is likely to be extended to you after last."

arrival of a new cap she had ordered just before her last swift illness seemed to induce in him the illusion of sorrow; and without the least idea of what he intended to do with them afterward he collected a quantity of small relics like spectacle-cases and caps and mittens, which he arranged upon his dressing-table and brooded over with brimming eyes. He indulged Harold's theories about the psychical state of his grandmother; he practised swinging a golf club, but he never once took out a ball; he treated everybody to magnificent wreaths, and presented the servants as well as his nephews and nieces with mourning; he ordered black-edged note-paper; he composed an epitaph in the manner of Sir Thomas Browne with cadences and subtle alliterations. Then came the funeral, which ruined the last few romantic notions of grief that he had been able to preserve.

To begin with, Beatrice arrived in what could only be described as a towering rage: no less commonplace epithet would have done justice to the vulgarity of her indignation. That James the eldest son and she his wife should not have been notified of the dangerous condition of Mama, but should have been summoned to the obsequies like mere friends of the family had outraged her soul, or, as Beatrice herself put it, had knocked her down like a feather. Oh yes, she had always been considered beneath the Touchwood standard of gentility, but poor Mama had not thought the worse of her for that; poor Mama had many times gone out of her way to be specially gracious towards her; poor Mama must have 'laid' there wondering why her eldest daughter-in-law did not come to give her the last and longest farewell. She had not been lucky enough to be blessed with children, but poor Mama had sometimes congratulated her upon that fact; poor Mama had realized only too well that children were not always a source of happiness. She knew that the undeserved poverty which had always dogged poor old Jimmie's footsteps had lately caused to be exacted from him the family portraits and the family silver pressed upon him by poor Mama herself; but was that a reason for excluding him from his mother's death-bed? She would not say whom she blamed, but she had her own ideas, and though Hilda might protest it was her fault,

## Poor Relations

she knew better; Hilda was incapable of such bar! she would *not* walk beside James as wife of the chief; she would follow in the rear of the funeral procession that at any rate she was not grudging that humble some people resented her having bought the lark from a very expensive flower-shop, she was not to carry the wreath herself; she had carried it all the town first-class to avoid its being crushed by heedless class passengers.

"And when I die," sobbed Beatrice, "I hope will remember we weren't allowed to see poor M. she went to Heaven, and will let me die quite alone. I don't want my death to interfere with other people's funerals."

The funeral party gathered round the open grave; read the service so slowly and the wind was so raw; it was depicted upon every countenance; the sniffing noses, above which rose Beatrice's sobs of mortification, mingled with the sighing of the yews and the asthmalic in a suitably lachrymose symphony.

"Now that poor Mama has gone," said Hilda to her that afternoon, "I daresay you're anxious for me to too."

"I really don't think you are entitled to ascribe to unnatural sentiments," John expostulated. "Why I want you to die?"

He could indeed ask this, for such an event would connote his adoption of Harold.

"I didn't mean you wanted me to die," said Hilda. "I meant you would like me to leave Ambles."

"Not at all. I'm delighted for you to stay here as it suits your convenience. And that applies equally to George. Also I may say to George," he added with a glance at Eleanor who had taken the opportunity of mourning to equip herself with a new set of black bearskin furs. Eleanor shook her head like a large animal emerging from the stream.

"And to me?" she asked with a challenge in her eyes.

"You must judge for yourself, Eleanor, how far my hospitality is likely to be extended willingly to you after this."

replied John coldly. He had not yet spoken to his sister-in-law about the interference of Sir Percy Mortimer with his private affairs, and he now awaited her excuses or reproaches with a curiosity that was very faintly tinged with apprehension.

"Oh, I'm not at all ashamed of what I did," she declared. "George can't speak up for himself, and it was my duty to do all I could to help him in a matter of life and death."

John's cheeks flushed with stormy rose like a menacing dawn, and he was about to break over his sister-in-law in thunder and lightning when Laurence, entering the room at the moment and only hearing imperfectly her last speech, nodded and sighed :

"Yes, yes. Eleanor is indeed right. Yes, yes. In the midst of life . . ."

Everybody hurried to take advantage of the diversion ; a hum of platitudes rose and fell upon the funereal air. John in a convulsion of irritability ordered the dogcart to drive him to the station. He was determined to travel back to town alone ; he feared that if he stayed any longer at Ambles his brother-in-law would revive the discussion about his play ; he was afraid of Hugh's taking advantage of his mother's death to dodge British Honduras, and of James' trading upon his filial piety to recover the silver and the family portraits.

When John got back to Church Row he found a note from Miss Hamilton to say she had influenza and was unlikely to be back at work for at least a week—if indeed, she added, she was able to come back at all. This unpleasant prospect filled him with genuine gloom, and it was with great difficulty that he refrained from driving immediately to Camera Square in order to remonstrate with her in person. His despondency was not lightened by Mrs. Worfolk's graveside manner and her assumption of a black satin dress hung with jet bugles that was usually reserved to mark the more cheerful festivals of the calendar. Worn thus out of season it hung about the rooms like a fog, and its frequent rustlings coupled with the housekeeper's sighs of commiseration added to the lugubrious atmosphere a sensation of damp which gave the final touch to John's depres-

## Poor Relations

sion. Next morning the weather was really abominable. The view over London from his library window showed not a ray of sun, but great cobwebs of rain that seemed to be actually hanging from a sky as grey and solid as a dusty ceiling. Action was the only hope of alleviating life upon such a day, and John set his mind to drive over to Chelsea and enquire about Doris's health. He found that she was better, though still bedridden; being anxious to learn more about her threatened recovery he accepted the maid's invitation to come in and see her. To Mrs. Hamilton. The old lady looked more like a clown than ever in the forenoon while the rice-powder was still on her cheeks, and John found her humour as irritating as he would have found the humour of a real clown in similar circumstances. Her manner towards him was that of a person who is aware of, but on certain terms is willing to overlook, his indiscretion, and she managed most successfully to make him feel that he was on his defence.

"Yes, poor Doris has been very seedy. And her illness has unfortunately coincided with mine."

"Oh, I'm sorry . . ." he began.

"Thank you. I'm used to being ill. I am always ill, at least, as luck will have it, I usually feel ill when Doris is ill. I'm doing nothing the matter with her."

This John was ready to believe, but he tried to look shocked and sympathetic.

"Do not let us discuss my health," Mrs. Hamilton said, scorching her eyebrows in the aureole of martyrdom. "Of what importance is my health? Poor Doris has had a very sharp attack, a very sharp attack indeed."

"I'm afraid that the weather . . ."

"It's not the weather, Mr. Touchwood. It is over Doris. And before John could say a word she was off. "Remember that Doris is not used to hard work. She has spent all her life with me, and you can easily imagine that with her mother always at hand she has been spared the least. I would have done anything for her. Ever since my mother died, my life has been one long buffer between Doris and the world. You know how obstinately she has refused to do all I wanted. I refer to my brother-in-law Mr. I . . ."

Glencockie. And this is the result. Nervous prostration, influenza, a high temperature—and sharp pains, which between ourselves I'm inclined to think are perhaps not so bad as she imagines. People who are not accustomed to pains," said the old lady jealously, "are always apt to be unduly alarmed and to attribute to them a severity that is a leetle exaggerated. I suffer so much myself that I cannot take these pains quite as seriously as Doris does. However, the poor child really has a good deal to put up with, and of course I've insisted that she must never attempt such hard work again. I don't suppose you meant to be inconsiderate, Mr. Touchwood. I don't accuse you of deliberate callousness. Please do not suppose that I am suggesting the least cruelty in your behaviour; but you *have* overworked her. Moreover, she has been worried. One or two of our friends have suggested more in joke than in earnest that she might be compromised by her association with you. No doubt this was said in joke; but Doris lacks her mother's sense of humour, and I'm afraid she has fretted over this. Still, a stitch in time saves nine, and her illness must serve as an excuse for what with a curiously youthful self-importance she calls 'leaving you in the lurch.' As I said to her, 'Do not, my dear child, worry about Mr. Touchwood. He can find as many secretaries as he wants. Probably he thought he was doing you a good turn, and you've overstrained yourself in trying to cope with duties to which you have not been accustomed. You cannot expect to fly before you can walk.' "

The old lady paused to fan back her breath, and John seized the conversation.

"Does Miss Hamilton herself wish to leave me like this, or is it only you who thinks that she ought to leave me?"

"I will be frank with you," the old lady panted. "Doris has not yet made up her mind."

"As long as she is allowed to make up her own mind," said John, "I have nothing to say. But I hope you are not going to overpersuade her. After all she is old enough to know what she wants to do."

"She is not as old as her mother."

He shook his head impatiently.

## Poor Relations

"Could I see her?"

"See her?" the old lady answered in amazement, "her, Mr. Touchwood? Didn't I explain that bed?"

"I beg your pardon. I'd forgotten."

"Men are apt to forget somewhat easily. C. do not let us get bitter. I took a great fancy to you when I met you first, and though I have been a little disappointed in the way in which you have taken advantage of Doris's goodness for new experiences I don't really bear you any grudge. I don't believe you meant to be selfish. No mother who can pierce a daughter's motives. You, with your recent loss should be able to appreciate that particular quality. Poor Doris! I wish she were more like me."

"If you really think I have overworked her,"

"I'm extremely sorry. I daresay her enthusiasm has worn away. But I cannot relinquish her services. Her struggle. She has been, and she is invaluable, to me, warmly."

"Yes, but we must think of her health. I don't seem so *intransigente*, but I am only thinking of her."

John was not at all taken in by the old lady's argument. He was entirely at a loss how to argue in favour of continuing to work for him. His perplexity was increased by the fact that she herself had written to express her willingness about returning; it might conceivably be that he did not want to return and that he was misjudging Doris's sincerity. Yet when he looked at the old lady he could not discover anything except a cold egotism in her face. Those flabby cheeks where the powder lay like dust in the ruts of a sunless lane. It was surely impossible. Doris should willingly have surrendered the liberty with him; she must have written under the delusion of influenza.

While John was pondering his line of action Mrs. Touchwood had fanned herself into a renewed volubility; it was impossible to cross the torrent of words which was now pouring forth, he sat down by the fire, confused and deafened, and sometimes gasping at the



when he was splashed by some particularly outrageous argument.

"Well, I'll write to her," he said at last.

"I beg you will do nothing of the kind. In the present feeble state of her health a letter will only agitate her. I hope to persuade her to come with me to Glencockie where her uncle will, I know, once more suggest adopting her as his heiress. . . ."

The old lady flowed on with schemes for the future of Doris, in which there was so much talk of Scotland that in the end his secretary appeared to John like an advertisement for whisky. He saw her rosy-checked and tam-o'-shantered, smiling beneath a fir-tree while mockingly she quaffed a glass to the health of her late employer. He saw her as a kind of cross between Flora Macdonald and Highland Mary by the banks of Loch Lomond. He saw her in every guise except that in which he desired to see her—bending with that elusive and ironical smile over the typewriter they had purchased together. Damn!

John made hurried adieus and fled to his taxi from the little house in Camera Square. The interview with Mrs. Hamilton had cost him half-a-crown and his peace of mind: it had cost the driver one halfpenny for the early edition of the *Star*. How much happier was the life of a taxi-driver than the life of a playwright!

"I wouldn't say as how Benedictine mightn't win at Kempton this afternoon," the driver observed to John when he alighted. "I reckon I'll have half-a-dollar on, any old way. It's Bolmondeley's horse and bound to run straight."

Benedictine did win that afternoon at six to one: indubitably the life of a taxi-driver was superior to his own, John thought as he turned with a shudder from the virgin foolscap upon his writing-desk and with a late edition of the *Star* sank into a deep armchair.

"A bachelor's life is a very lonely one," he sighed. For some reason Maud had neglected to draw the curtains after tea, and the black yawning window where the rain glistened drearily weighed upon his heart with a sense of utter abandonment.

## *Poor Relations*

Ordinarily he would have rung the bell and painfully to the omission; but this afternoon, he refused to stir from his chair to ring a bell. He could muster enough energy to poke the fire, which was as little life as himself. He listened vainly for the Maud or Mrs. Worfolk that he might call out from this lethargy of despair; but not a sound except the dripping rain outside and the consumption of the moribund fire.

"Perhaps I'm feeling my mother's death, hopefully."

He made an effort to concentrate his mind upon the retrospective of family life. He tried to consider that the death of his mother would involve a radical change of attitude of his relations. Technically he might be the eldest son, and while his mother had been alive he had assumed too definitely the rights of an eldest son. However, that was his status, and his acquisition of portraits and family silver could well be taken as a sign of that status; with his mother's death he could consider himself in the eyes of the world the head of the family. Did he want such an honour? It would be an honour, but a troublesome, and ungrateful post like the Lord of Ireland. Why didn't Maud come and draw the family silver? A thankless job, and it would be more congenial to her than the family of his own. That meant marriage. And when would he get married? Several palmists had assured him that he would be married one day: most of them indeed had said that he was married already.

"If I get married I can no longer be expected to look after about my relations. Of course in that case I should have to give up the portraits and the silver. My son would be junior to me. My son would occupy an altogether inferior position in the family, though he would always take precedence of Harold. But if my son had children, Harold would be an uncle. No, he wouldn't. Harold would be a first cousin once removed. Harold cannot become an uncle unless I marry again and have another child. Harold is another child. Luckily, it's all very improbable. I don't want Harold."

when he was splashed by some particularly outrageous argument.

"Well, I'll write to her," he said at last.

"I beg you will do nothing of the kind. In the present feeble state of her health a letter will only agitate her. I hope to persuade her to come with me to Glencockie where her uncle will, I know, once more suggest adopting her as his heiress. . . ."

The old lady flowed on with schemes for the future of Doris, in which there was so much talk of Scotland that in the end his secretary appeared to John like an advertisement for whisky. He saw her rosy-cheeked and tam-o'-shantered, smiling beneath a fir-tree while mockingly she quaffed a glass to the health of her late employer. He saw her as a kind of cross between Flora Macdonald and Highland Mary by the banks of Loch Lomond. He saw her in every guise except that in which he desired to see her—bending with that elusive and ironical smile over the typewriter they had purchased together. Damn!

John made hurried adieus and fled to his taxi from the little house in Camera Square. The interview with Mrs. Hamilton had cost him half-a-crown and his peace of mind: it had cost the driver one halfpenny for the early edition of the *Star*. How much happier was the life of a taxi-driver than the life of a playwright!

"I wouldn't say as how Benedictine mightn't win at Kempton this afternoon," the driver observed to John when he alighted. "I reckon I'll have half-a-dollar on, any old way. It's Bolmondeley's horse and bound to run straight."

Benedictine did win that afternoon at six to one: indubitably the life of a taxi-driver was superior to his own, John thought as he turned with a shudder from the virgin foolscap upon his writing-desk and with a late edition of the *Star* sank into a deep armchair.

"A bachelor's life is a very lonely one," he sighed. For some reason Maud had neglected to draw the curtains after tea, and the black yawning window where the rain glistened drearily weighed upon his heart with a sense of utter abandonment.

## *Poor Relations*

Ordinarily he would have rung the bell and pointed fully to the omission ; but this afternoon, he feared stirring from his chair to ring a bell. He could muster enough energy to poke the fire, which worked as little life as himself. He listened vainly for the Maud or Mrs. Worfolk that he might call out and from this lethargy of despair ; but not a sound except the dripping rain outside and the consumption of the moribund fire.

“ Perhaps I’m feeling my mother’s death,” hopelessly.

He made an effort to concentrate his mind upon the retrospective of family life. He tried to consider that the death of his mother would involve a change of attitude of his relations. Technically he might be the eldest son, and while his mother had been alive he had assumed too definitely the rights of an eldest son. However, that was his status, and his acquisition of portraits and family silver could well be taken as a sign of that status ; with his mother’s death he could consider himself in the eyes of the world the head of the family. Did he want such an honour ? It would be a troublesome, and ungrateful post like the Lord of Ireland. Why didn’t Maud come and draw the lot ? A thankless job, and it would be more congenial to a family of his own. That meant marriage. And when he got married ? Several palmists had assured him he would be married one day : most of them indeed had said he was married already.

“ If I get married I can no longer be expected to do anything about my relations. Of course in that case I should have to give up the portraits and the silver. My son would be just as good as a son-in-law. My son would occupy an altogether inferior position in the family, though he would always be the favourite of Harold. But if my son had children, Harold would be an uncle. No, he wouldn’t. Harold would be once removed. Harold cannot become an uncle if I marry again and have another child who has a right to the silver. Luckily, it’s all very improbable. I’m glad

likely to be an uncle: he would bring the relationship into an even greater disrepute. Still, even now an uncle is disreputable enough. The wicked uncle! It's proverbial, of course. We never hear of the wicked cousin or the nefarious aunt. No, uncles share with stepmothers the opprobrium and with mothers-in-law the ridicule of the mob. Unquestionably, if I do marry, I shall still be an uncle, but the status may perhaps be merged in paternity. Suppose I marry and never have any children? My wife will be pitied by Hilda, Edith and Eleanor and consoled with by Beatrice. She would find her position intolerable. My wife? I wish to goodness Maud would come in and draw those curtains. My wife? That's the question. At this stage the problem of her personality is more important than theoretical speculation about future children: Should I enjoy a woman's bobbing in and out of my room all the time? Suppose I were married at this moment, it would be my wife's duty to correct Maud for not having drawn those curtains. If I were married at this moment I should say 'My dear, Maud does not seem to have drawn the curtains. I wonder why.' And my wife would of course ring the bell and remonstrate with Maud. But suppose my wife were upstairs? She might be trying on a new hat. Apparently wives spend a great deal of time with hats. In that case I should be no better off than I am at present. I should still have to get out of this chair and ring for Maud. And I should have to complain twice over. Once to Maud herself and afterwards all over again to my wife about Maud. Then my wife would have to rebuke Maud... Oh, it would be a terribly complicated business. Perhaps I'm better off as a bachelor. It's an odd thing that with my pictorial temperament I should never yet have visualized myself as a husband. My imagination is quite untrammelled in most directions. Were I to decide to-morrow that I would write a play about Adam and Eve, I should see myself as Adam and Eve and the Serpent and almost as the Forbidden Fruit itself without any difficulty. Why can't I see myself as a husband? When I think of the number of people and things I've been in imagination it really does seem extraordinary! I should never have thought of being a husband. Apparently Maud has completely forgotten about the curtains. It looks as if I

## Poor Relations

should have to give up all hope now of her coming them of her own accord. Poor Miss Hamilton! that horrible old clown of a mother isn't turning round her room at this moment and sending up her figure to three figures. Of course, she must come. She is indispensable. I miss her very much. I've myself to a secretary's assistance, and naturally I'm left her. These morbid thoughts about matrimony are not having done a stroke of work all day. I will come and rise from this chair."

John counted seventeen, but when he came to that number he found that his will to move was still paralysed; he went on to forty-nine—the next fatal number in cabala. When he reached it he tightened every muscle and leapt to his feet. Inertia was succeeded by activity: he rang for Maud; he poked the fire; he blew the tobacco-ash from his waistcoat; he blew his nose and sat down at his desk.

*My dear Miss Hamilton, he wrote, I cannot say how distressed I was to hear the news of your illness and still to learn from your mother that you were seriously thinking of leaving your post. I'm also extremely distressed to hear that there are symptoms of overwork. If I've been inconsiderate, I beg your forgiveness and ask you to attribute it to your over-zeal. The fact is your example does inspire me. With your encouragement I undoubtedly do work much harder than I do now. To-day without you I have not written a single word, and I am dreadfully depressed at the prospect of your desertion. I can only plead for your services when you are well again, at any rate. I've finished "Joan of Arc," for I really don't think I can finish that play without them. I have felt the death of your mother very much, but I do not ascribe my present disinclination for work to that. No, on the contrary I came back from her funeral with a determination to bury myself—that I expressed better—to plunge myself into hard work. Your telling me of your illness was a great shock, and your uncompromising attitude this morning has added to my distress. I feel that I am growing old and view with horror the prospect of age. I've been sitting by the fire indulging myself*

morbid thoughts. You will laugh when I tell you that amongst them was the idea—I might call it the chimæra of marriage. Do please get well soon and rescue me from myself.

Yours very sincerely,  
John Touchwood.

I do not of course wish to disturb the relationship between yourself and your mother, but my own recent loss has reminded me that mothers do not live for ever.

## Chapter Fifteen

JOHN waited in considerable anxiety for Miss Hamilton's reply to his letter, and when a few days later she came to his appeal in person by presenting herself for what he could not express in words the intensity of his sorrow, he could only prance round her as if he had a tame domestic animal instead of a celebrated romantic play-actress.

"And what have you done since I've been away?" she asked without alluding to her illness or to her mother's threat of being obliged to leave him.

John looked abashed.

"Not very much I'm afraid."

"How much?"

"Well, to be quite honest, nothing at all."

She referred sympathetically to the death of Mrs. Wood, and without the ghost of a blush he availed himself of that excuse for idleness.

"But now you're back," he added, "I'm going to work harder than ever. Oh, but I forgot. I mustn't tell you."

"Nonsense," said Miss Hamilton sharply. "I don't care for the amount you write every day will ever do me much good."

John busied himself with paper, pens, ink, and notes, and was soon as deep in the fourth act as if there had been any intermission. For a month he worked in tranquillity, and went so far as to calculate that if Miss Hamilton was willing to remain for ever in his employ there was no reason why he should not produce three plays a year until he was seventy. Then one morning in mid February Mr. Russell arrived in a state of perturbation to say that he had been unable to obtain any reply to several letters and telegrams informing Hugh when their steamer would leave. Now they were with only a day before departure, and he was without news of the young man. John looked guilty. The fact was that he had decided not to open any letters from Hugh, and to keep the relations throughout this month, alleging that he was



ruption they caused to his work and trusting to the old superstition that if left unanswered long enough all letters, even the most disagreeable, answered themselves.

"I was wondering why your correspondence had dwindled so," said Miss Hamilton severely.

"But that is no excuse for my brother," John declared. "Because I don't write to him, that is no reason why he shouldn't write to Mr. Ricketts."

"Well, we're off to-morrow," said the mahogany-planter.

An indignant telegram was sent to Hugh; but the prepaid answer came back from Hilda to say that he had gone away with a friend a fortnight ago without leaving any address. Mr. Ricketts, who had been telephoned for in the morning, arrived about noon in a taxi loaded with exotic luggage.

"I can't wait," he assured John. "The lad must come on by the next boat. I shan't go up country for a week or so. Good-bye, Mr. Touchwood; I'm sorry not to have your brother's company. I was going to put him wise to the job on the trip across."

"But look here, can't you . . ." John began despairingly.

"Can't wait. I shall miss the boat. West India Docks," he shouted to the driver, "and stop at the last decent pub in the city on the way through."

The taxi buzzed off.

Two days later Hugh appeared at Church Row; he mentioned casually that he was sorry he had missed the boat, but that he had been doing a little architectural job for a friend of his.

"Very good bridge," he commented approvingly.

"Over what?" John demanded.

"Over very good whisky," said Hugh. "It was up in the North. Capital fun. I was designing a smoking-room for a man I know who's just come into money. I've had a ripping time. Good hands every evening and a very decent fee. In fact I don't see why I shouldn't start an office of my own."

"And what about mahogany?"

"Look here, I never liked that idea of yours, Johnnie. Everybody agrees that British Honduras is a rotten climate, and if you want to help me, you can help me much more effectively by setting me up on my own as an architect."

## Poor Relations

"I do not want to help you. I've invested £20,000 in any and logwood, and I insist on getting as much of my money as your absence from England will bring."

"Yes, that's all very well, old chap. But why did I come to leave England?"

John embarked upon a justification of his action, a course of which he pointed out the dangers, which reminded Hugh of the forgery, tried to inspire him with independence, hinted at moral obligations, and talked about colonial enterprise. As a mountain of fiction, his speech was wonderful: clothed on the lower slopes with easy and varied vegetation of example and precept, it ascended to the hard rocks of necessity, honour, until it culminated in a peak of snow where John's motive glittered immaculately and inviolably. It was therefore discouraging for the orator when he stood and walked slowly up stage to give the culprit an opportunity to make a suitably penitent reply, after which there was to come down upon a final outburst of magnificent eloquence from himself, that Hugh should merely utter a contemptuous monosyllable "rot."

"Rot?" repeated John in amazement.

"Yes. Rot! I'm not going to reason with you . . ."

"Ah, indeed?" John interrupted sarcastically.

"Because reason would be lost on you. I simply say 'Rot!' If I don't want to go to British Honduras, I won't go. Why, to hear you talk, anybody would suppose I hadn't had the same opportunities as yourself. If I had, to blur your intelligence by writing romantic tushery, you would remember that by doing so you yielded to temptation as much as I did when I forged Stevie's name. Do you think I would write plays like yours? Never!" he proclaimed proudly.

"It seems to me that the conversation is indeed going outside the limits of reason," said John trying hard to restrain himself.

"My dear old chap, it has never been inside the limits of reason, you collared me when I was down over that cheque. Here's what you paid to get me out of the mess." He

ruption they caused to his work and trusting to the old superstition that if left unanswered long enough all letters, even the most disagreeable, answered themselves.

"I was wondering why your correspondence had dwindled so," said Miss Hamilton severely.

"But that is no excuse for my brother," John declared. "Because I don't write to him, that is no reason why he shouldn't write to Mr. Ricketts."

"Well, we're off to-morrow," said the mahogany-planter.

An indignant telegram was sent to Hugh; but the prepaid answer came back from Hilda to say that he had gone away with a friend a fortnight ago without leaving any address. Mr. Ricketts, who had been telephoned for in the morning, arrived about noon in a taxi loaded with exotic luggage.

"I can't wait," he assured John. "The lad must come on by the next boat. I shan't go up country for a week or so. Good-bye, Mr. Touchwood; I'm sorry not to have your brother's company. I was going to put him wise to the job on the trip across."

"But look here, can't you . . ." John began despairingly.

"Can't wait. I shall miss the boat. West India Docks," he shouted to the driver, "and stop at the last decent pub in the city on the way through."

The taxi buzzed off.

Two days later Hugh appeared at Church Row; he mentioned casually that he was sorry he had missed the boat, but that he had been doing a little architectural job for a friend of his.

"Very good bridge," he commented approvingly.

"Over what?" John demanded.

"Over very good whisky," said Hugh. "It was up in the North. Capital fun. I was designing a smoking-room for a man I know who's just come into money. I've had a ripping time. Good hands every evening and a very decent fee. In fact I don't see why I shouldn't start an office of my own."

"And what about mahogany?"

"Look here, I never liked that idea of yours, Johnnie. Everybody agrees that British Honduras is a rotten climate, and if you want to help me, you can help me much more effectively by setting me up on my own as an architect."

## *Poor Relations*

The only place in fact to which John did not club, and that was only because he was not allowed ladies there.

"A rather mediæval restriction," he observed a group assembled in the smoking-room.

"There was a time, Touchwood, when you refuge here from your leading ladies," a baronet chuckled.

"But nowadays Touchwood has followed Alfred rest of us," put in another.

"What's that?" said John sharply.

There was a general burst of merriment with and wagging of fingers, from which and a few ribald comments John began to wonder if his privacy beginning to be a subject for club gossip. He prevented himself from saying that he thought such taste, because he did not wish to give point to it too much in earnest. Nevertheless, he was serious and avoided the smoking-room for a week.

One night after the first performance of a friend turned in to the club for supper, and being asleep, because although it was a friend's play it was a tremendous success, which always made him feel about his own future, he lingered on until the smoking nearly deserted. Toward three o'clock he was sitting in a quiet corner, when he heard his name mentioned by members who had taken seats close by without his presence. They were both strangers to him, and he rose from his chair and walked severely out of the room. He heard one say to the other:

"Yes, they tell me his brother-in-law writes his name."

John found this so delightfully diverting and could not resist keeping quiet to hear more.

"Oh, I don't believe that," said the second member.

"Fact, I assure you. I was told so by a man named Eleanor Cartright."

"The actress?"

Miss Hamilton shrugged her shoulders.

"She isn't yet reconciled to my being a secretary, if that's what you mean."

"I'm sorry," John murmured. "Confound all relations!" he burst out. "I suppose she'd object to your going to France with me to finish off the play?"

"She would object violently. But you mustn't forget that I've a will of my own."

"Of course you have," said her employer admiringly. "And you will go, eh?"

"I'll see—I won't promise. Look here, Mr. Touchwood, I don't want to seem—what shall I call it—timid, but if I did go to France with you, I suppose you realize my mother would make such a fuss about it that people would end by really talking? Forgive my putting such an unpleasant idea into your innocent head; being your confidential secretary, I feel I oughtn't to let you run any risks. I don't suppose you care a bit how much people talk, and I'm sure I don't; at the same time I shouldn't like you to turn round on me and say I ought to have warned you."

"Talk!" John exclaimed. "The idea is preposterous. Talk! Good gracious me, can't I take my secretary abroad without being accused of ulterior motives?"

"Now don't work yourself up into a state of wrath, or you won't be able to think of this terribly important last scene. Anyway, we shan't be going to France yet, and we can discuss the project more fully when the time comes."

John thought vaguely how well Miss Hamilton knew how to keep him unruffled, and with a grateful look—or what was meant to be a grateful look, though she blushed unaccountably when he gave it—he concentrated upon the site of his heroine's scaffold.

During March the weather was so bright and exhilarating that John and his secretary took many walks together on Hampstead Heath; they also often went to town, and John derived much pleasure from discussing various business affairs with her clerical support; he found that it helped considerably when dealing with the manager of a film-company to be able to say "Will you make a note of that please, Miss Hamilton?"

## *Poor Relations*

The only place in fact to which John did not take club, and that was only because he was not allowed to take ladies there.

"A rather mediæval restriction," he observed a group assembled in the smoking-room.

"There was a time, Touchwood, when you could find refuge here from your leading ladies," a bachelor chuckled.

"But nowadays Touchwood has followed A. and the rest of us," put in another.

"What's that?" said John sharply.

There was a general burst of merriment with laughing and wagging of fingers, from which and a succession of ribald comments John began to wonder if his position was beginning to be a subject for club gossip. He prevented himself from saying that he thought such a thing was out of taste, because he did not wish to give point to it too much in earnest. Nevertheless, he was serious and avoided the smoking-room for a week.

One night after the first performance of a friend's play turned in to the club for supper, and being disappointed to go to sleep, because although it was a friend's play it had had a tremendous success, which always made him feel anxious for his own future, he lingered on until the smoking-room was nearly deserted. Toward three o'clock he was sitting in a quiet corner, when he heard his name mentioned by two members who had taken seats close by without his presence. They were both strangers to him, and he rose from his chair and walk severely out of the room. He heard one say to the other:

"Yes, they tell me his brother-in-law writes for him."

John found this so delightfully diverting and so amusing that he could not resist keeping quiet to hear more.

"Oh, I don't believe that," said the second member.

"Fact, I assure you. I was told so by a friend of mine, an Eleanor Cartright."

"The actress?"

"By Jove, that will cause a terrific scandal, eh?"

John decided he had heard enough. Assuming an expression of intense superiority, the sort of expression a man might assume who was standing on the top of Mount Everest, he rose from his chair, eyed the two gossips with disdain, and strode out of the smoking-room. Just as he reached the door, he heard number one exclaim:

"Hulloa, see who that was? That was old Percy Mortimer."

"Oh, of course," said number two as sapiently as ever. "I didn't recognize him for a moment. He's beginning to show his age, eh?"

On the way back to Hampstead John tried to assure himself that the conversation he had just overheard did not represent anything more important than the vapourings of an exceptionally idiotic pair of men about town; but the more he meditated upon the tales about himself evidently now in general circulation, the more he was appalled at the recklessness of calumny.

"One has joked about it. One has laughed at Sheridan's *School for Scandal*. One has admitted that human beings are capable of almost incredible exaggeration. But—no really this is too much. I've gossiped sometimes myself about my friends, but never like that about a stranger—a man in the public eye."

John nearly stopped the taxi to ask the driver if *he* had heard any stories about John Touchwood; but he decided it would not be wise to run risk of discovery that he enjoyed less publicity than he was beginning to imagine, and he kept his indignation to himself.

"After all, it is a sign of—well, yes, I think it might fairly be called fame—a sign of fame to be talked about like that by a couple of ignorant chatterboxes. It is, I suppose, a tribute to my position. But Laurence! That's what annoyed me most. Laurence to be the author of my plays! I begin to understand this ridiculous Bacon and Shakespeare legend now. The rest of the gossip was malicious, but that was—really, I think it was actionable. I shall take it up with the committee. The idea of that pompous nincompoop writing Lucretia's soliloquy before she poisons her lips! Laurence! Good heavens! And fancy Laurence writing Nebuchadnezzar's meditation upon

## Poor Relations

grass! By Jove, an audience would have some then! And Laurence writing Joan's defence of Beauvais! Why, the bombastic pedant could write a satisfactory letter to the Bishop of Silchester to prevent him from being ignominiously chucked out of his job.

The infuriated author bounced up and down on the seat of the taxi in his rage.

"Shall I give you an arm up the steps, sir?" offered genially, when John, having alighted at his door, had excessively overpaid him under the impression he was still smarting of being called a skinflint.

"No, thank you."

"Beg pardon, sir. I thought you was a little lively. You seemed a bit lively inside on the way up."

"I suppose the next thing is I shall get the reputation of being a dipsomaniac," said John to himself, as he unlocked his door and marched immediately with a slightly affected rigidity of bearing upstairs to bed.

But he could not sleep. The legend of his behaviour was obviously common gossip in London, oppressed by its injustice. Every accusation took on a new and more sinister form, while he turned over and over in an attempt to reach oblivion. He began to worry now more about what was implied in his association with Miss Hamilton than about the other stories. He felt that it would only be a very short time before she would hear of the tale in some monstrous shape and leave him for ever in righteous disgust. Ought he indeed to make her aware to-morrow morning of what was being suggested? And even if he did not say anything about it to-night, ought he to compromise her more deeply in the future?

It was six o'clock before John fell asleep, and it was a violent headache that he faced his secretary after breakfast. Luckily there was a letter from Janet Bond asking him to call and see her that morning upon a matter of importance. He seized the excuse to postpone any discussion of last night's revelation, and telling Miss Hamilton he should be back at lunch he decided to walk down to the Parthenon Theatre in the hope of arriving there with a clearer and more definite opinion. He nearly told her to go home; but refrained.



come back in quite a different mood he asked her instead to occupy herself with the collation of some scattered notes upon *Joan of Arc* that were not yet incorporated into the scheme of the play. He remembered, too, that it would be his birthday in three days' time, and he asked her to send out notes of invitation to his family for the annual celebration, at which the various members liked to delude themselves with the idea that by presenting him with a number of useless accessories to the smoking-table they were repaying him in full for all his kindness. He determined that his birthday speech on this occasion should be made the vehicle for administering a stern rebuke to malicious gossip. He would dam once for all this muddy stream of scandal, and he would make Laurence write a letter to the press disclaiming the authorship of his plays. Burning with reformatory zeal and fast losing his headache, John swung down Fitzjohn's Avenue in the spangled March sunlight to the wicked city below.

The Parthenon Theatre had for its acropolis the heights of the Adelphi, where viewed from the embankment gardens below it seemed to be looking condescendingly down upon the efforts of the London County Council to intellectualize the musical taste of the generation. In the lobby—it had been called the propylæum until it was found that such a long name had discouraged the public from booking seats beforehand through fear of mispronouncing it—a bust of Janet Bond represented the famous statue of Pallas Athene on the original acropolis, and the programme-girls dressed as caryatides supplied another charming touch of antiquity. The proprietress herself was the outstanding instance in modern times of the exploitation of virginity—it must have been a profitable exploitation too, because the Parthenon Theatre itself had been built and paid for by her unsuccessful admirers. Each year made Janet Bond's position as virgin and actress more secure, and at the rate her reputation was growing it was probable that she would soon be at liberty to produce the most immodest plays. At present, however, she still applied the same standard of her conduct to her plays as to herself. Nor did she confine herself to that. She was also very strict about the private lives of her performers, and many a young actress

## *Poor Relations*

had been seen to leave the stage-door in tears. Bond had observed her in unsuitable company. Mothers wrote from all over England to beg her to charge herself with the care of their stage-struck children; the result was a conventual tone among the supernaturally slightly flavoured with militant suffragism and mathematics. Nor was art neglected; indeed she hinted that in the Parthenon Theatre art was cultivated at the expense of life, though none of them attempted that Miss Bond had learned how to make virtue pay, selling it.

In appearance the great tragedienne was somewhat less in outline than might have been expected, and more than virginal, perhaps because she was in her own mother to all her girls. Her voice was rich and deep with much variety as a cunningly sounded gong. She came up for the stage, and she wore hygienic corsets: this fact was allowed to escape through the indiscretion of a spread advertizement, but its publication helped her reputation for decorum, and clergymen who read their wives' *Queen* commented favourably on the contrast between Miss Bond and the numerous open-mouthed actresses who preferred to advertize toothpaste. England was proud of Miss Bond, feeling that America had no longer any right to vaunt a monopoly of virtuous actresses; and John when he rang the bell of Miss Bond's flat that existed cleverly in the roof of the theatre was proud of his association with her. He did not have to wait long in her austere study; indeed he had barely time to admire the fluted calyx of a white trumpet daffodil that in chaste symbolism was the only occupant of the blue china bowl before Miss Bond herself came in.

"I'm so hating what I'm going to have to say to you," she boomed.

This was a jolly way to begin an interview, John thought, especially in his present mood. He tried to look attentively, faintly surprised, dignified, and withal deferential; but being a great actor he failed to express all these states of mind at a go, and only succeeded in dropping his gloves.

"Hating it," the actress cried. "Oh, hating it!"

"Well, if you'd rather postpone it," John began.

"No, no. It must be said now. It's just this!" She paused and fixed the author more intensely than a snake fixes a rabbit or a woman in a bus tries to see if the woman opposite has blacked her eyelashes. "Can I produce *Joan of Arc*?"

"I think that question is answered by our contract," replied John, who was used to leading ladies and when they started like this always fell back at once in good order on business.

"Yes, but what about my unwritten contract with the public?" she demanded.

"I don't know anything about that," said the author. "Moreover, I don't see how an unwritten contract can interfere with our written contract."

"John Touchwood, I'm going to be frank with you, fiercely frank. I can't afford to produce a play by you about a heroine like Joan of Arc unless you take steps to put things right."

"If you want me to cut that scene . . ."

"Oh, I'm not talking about scenes, John Touchwood. I'm talking about these terrible stories that everybody is whispering about you. I don't mind myself what you do. Good gracious me, I'm a broad-minded modern woman; but my public looks for something special at the Parthenon. The knowledge that I am going to play the Maid of Orleans has moved them indescribably; I was fully prepared to give you the success of your career, but . . . these stories! This girl! You know what people are saying? You must have heard. How can I put your name on my programme as the author of *Joan of Arc*? How can I, John Touchwood?"

If John had not overheard that conversation at his club the night before, he would have supposed that Miss Bond had gone mad.

"May I enquire exactly what you have heard about me and my private life?" he enquired as judicially as he could.

"Please spare me from repeating the stories. I can honestly assure you that I don't believe them. But you as a man of the world know very well how unimportant it is whether a story is true or not. If you were a writer of realistic drama, these stories, however bad they were, wouldn't matter. If your next play was going to be produced at the Court Theatre, these

## Poor Relations

stories would if anything be in favour of success the Parthenon . . .”

“You are talking nonsense, Miss Bond,” in angrily. “You are more in a condition to play Joan of Arc. Moreover, you shan’t play Joan of Arc. I’ve really been regretting for some weeks now that you don’t play her, and I’m delighted to have this ~~case~~ preventing you from playing her. I don’t know a tittle-tattle you’ve been listening. I don’t care. Your own virtue may be completely justified, but your judgment of other people’s is vulgar and—how can I recommend you to produce a play by my brother—Reverend Laurence Armitage. Even your insatiable curiosity may be gratified by the part of the Virgin Mary, . . . the chief characters. Good morning, Miss Bond. I will communicate with you more precisely through my agent.”

John marched out of the theatre, and on the outside ran into Miss Ida Merritt.

“Ah, you’re a sensible woman,” he spluttered, in her astonishment. “For goodness’ sake come and have dinner with me, and let’s talk over everything.”

John in his relief at meeting Miss Merritt had taken her arm in a cordial fashion, and steered her across the Strand to Romano’s without waiting to choose a less conspicuous theatrical restaurant. Indeed in his anxiety to clear his conscience he forgot everything, and it was only when he saw people at the little tables nudging one another and touching their heads together that he realized he was holding Miss Merritt’s arm. He dropped it like a hot coal, and fell down at a table marked *Reserved*. The head waiter came across to apprise him of the mistake, and John who was horribly self-conscious fancied that the slight incident created a stir throughout the restaurant. No doubt it would be all over town by evening that he and his companion had been refused service at every restaurant in London.

“Look here,” said John when at last they were accommodated at a table painfully near the grill, the spitting and hissing of which seemed to symbolize the attitude of a hostile society.  
“Look here, what stories have you heard about me?”

a journalist. You write chatty paragraphs. For Heaven's sake tell me the worst."

"Oh, I haven't heard anything that's printable," Miss Merritt assured him with a laugh.

John put his head between his hands and groaned; the waiter thought he was going to dip his hair into the hors d'œuvres and hurriedly removed the dishes.

"No, seriously, I beg you to tell me if you've heard my name connected in any unpleasant way with Miss Hamilton."

"No, the only thing I've heard about Doris is that your brother Hugh is always pestering her with his attentions."

"What?" John shouted.

"Coming, sair," cried the waiter, skipping round the table like a monkey.

John waved him away, and begged Miss Merritt to be more explicit.

"Why didn't she complain to me?" he asked when he had heard her story.

"She probably thought she could look after herself. Besides, wasn't he going to British Guiana?"

"He was," replied John. "At least he was going to some tropical colony. I've heard so many mentioned that I'm beginning myself to forget which it was now. So that's why he didn't go. But he shall go. If I have to have him kidnapped and spend all my savings on chartering a private yacht for the purpose, by Heaven, he shall go. If he shrivels up like a burnt sausage the moment he puts his foot on the beach he shall be left there to shrivel. The rascal! When does he pester her? Where?"

"Don't get so excited. Doris is perfectly capable of looking after herself. Besides, I think she rather likes him in a way."

"Never," John cried.

"Liver is finished, sair," said the officious waiter dancing in again between John and Miss Merritt.

John shook his fist at him and leant earnestly over the table with one elbow in the butter.

"You don't seriously suggest that she is in love with him?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. But I met him myself once and

## *Poor Relations*

took rather a fancy to him. No, she just likes 'is. It's he who's in love with her."

"Under my very eyes," John ejaculated. "overwhelming."

A sudden thought struck him that even at a while he was calmly eating lunch with Miss M somewhat loosely qualified the verb, Hugh might love to Miss Hamilton in his own house.

"Look here," he cried, "have you nearly finished? I've suddenly remembered an important appointment at Hampstead."

"I don't want any more," said Miss Merritt obligingly.

"Waiter, the bill! Quick! You don't mind leaving me and leave you to finish your cheese alone?"

His guest shook her head, and John hurried out of the restaurant.

No taxi he had travelled in had ever seemed so slow. He kept putting his head out of the window to urge the driver to greater speed, until the man goaded to rudeness by his exhortations and the trams in Tottenham Court Road, thought if his fare thought he was a blinking bullet.

"I'm not bullying you. I'm only asking you to go a little faster," John shouted back.

The driver threw his eyes heavenward in a gesture of protest for John's sanity; he was pacified at Church Row and even went so far as to explain that he was sovereign and even went so far as to explain that he had accused John of bullying him, but merely of comparing his capacity for speed with that of a bullet's. John, who was asking for more money, gave him half-a-crown and with his arm in benediction half in protest hurried into the restaurant.

"They've nearly finished lunch, sir," murmured the waiter who was just coming from the dining-room. "Would you like to hot you up something?"

John without a word pounced into the dining-room, he caught Hugh with a stick of celery half-way up his mouth and Miss Hamilton with a glass of water down from hers.

"Oh, I'm so sorry we began without you," said the waiter simultaneously.

a journalist. You write chatty paragraphs. For Heaven's sake tell me the worst."

"Oh, I haven't heard anything that's printable," Miss Merritt assured him with a laugh.

John put his head between his hands and groaned; the waiter thought he was going to dip his hair into the hors d'œuvres and hurriedly removed the dishes.

"No, seriously, I beg you to tell me if you've heard my name connected in any unpleasant way with Miss Hamilton."

"No, the only thing I've heard about Doris is that your brother Hugh is always pestering her with his attentions."

"What?" John shouted.

"Coming, sair," cried the waiter, skipping round the table like a monkey.

John waved him away, and begged Miss Merritt to be more explicit.

"Why didn't she complain to me?" he asked when he had heard her story.

"She probably thought she could look after herself. Besides, wasn't he going to British Guiana?"

"He was," replied John. "At least he was going to some tropical colony. I've heard so many mentioned that I'm beginning myself to forget which it was now. So that's why he didn't go. But he shall go. If I have to have him kidnapped and spend all my savings on chartering a private yacht for the purpose, by Heaven, he shall go. If he shrivels up like a burnt sausage the moment he puts his foot on the beach he shall be left there to shrivel. The rascal! When does he pester her? Where?"

"Don't get so excited. Doris is perfectly capable of looking after herself. Besides, I think she rather likes him in a way."

"Never," John cried.

"Liver is finished, sair," said the officious waiter dancing in again between John and Miss Merritt.

John shook his fist at him and leant earnestly over the table with one elbow in the butter.

"You don't seriously suggest that she is in love with him?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. But I met him myself once and

## Poor Relations

took rather a fancy to him. No, she just l. It's he who's in love with her."

"Under my very eyes," John ejaculated, "overwhelming."

A sudden thought struck him that even while he was calmly eating lunch with Miss Hamilton in his own house.

"Look here," he cried, "have you nearly finished? I've suddenly remembered an important affair in Hampstead."

"I don't want any more," said Miss Merritt.

"Waiter, the bill! Quick! You don't mind and leave you to finish your cheese alone?"

His guest shook her head, and John hurried to the restaurant.

No taxi he had travelled in had ever seemed so slow. He kept putting his head out of the window to urge the driver to greater speed, until the man goaded to rudeness by his exhortations and the trams in Tottenham Court Road if his fare thought he was a blinking bullet.

"I'm not bullying you. I'm only asking you to go a little faster," John shouted back.

The driver threw his eyes heavenward in a gesture of protest for John's sanity; he was pacified at Church Row by the driver's sovereign and even went so far as to explain that he had accused John of bullying him, but merely of confusing his capacity for speed with that of a bullet's. John thought that as he was asking for more money, gave him half-a-crown and with his arm in benediction half in protest hurried into the hall.

"They've nearly finished lunch, sir," murmured Maud. "Would you like to join them?" "Would you like to join them?" "Would you like to join them?"

John without a word pounced into the dining-room, where he caught Hugh with a stick of celery half-way up to his mouth and Miss Hamilton with a glass of water half-way down from hers.

"Oh, I'm so sorry we began without you," said John simultaneously.



John murmured something about a trying interview with Janet Bond, lit a cigar, remembered it was rude to light cigars when people were still eating, threw the cigar away, and sat down with an appearance of exhaustion in one of those dining-room armchairs that stand and wait all their lives to serve a moment like this.

"I'm sorry, but I must ask you to go off as soon as you've finished your lunch, Hugh. I've a lot of important business to transact with Miss Hamilton."

"Oh, but I've finished already," she exclaimed jumping up from the table.

It was the first pleasant moment in John's day, and he smiled gratefully. He felt he could even afford to be generous to this intrusive brother, and before he left the room with Miss Hamilton he invited him to have some more celery.

"And you'll find a cigar in the sideboard," he added. "But Maud will look after you. Maud, look after Mr. Hugh, please, and if anybody calls this afternoon, I'm not at home."

## Chapter Sixteen

JOHN'S first impulse had been to pour out to Doris's ear the tale of his wrongs, and she had sufficiently impressed her with the position in which the world was trying to place him to marry him as the only way to escape further thoughts, he decided that she might be offended by the notion of having been compromised by him and resent the notion of their marriage's being no more than a public opinion. He therefore abandoned the idea of settling upon the scandal their association had created and proposed to substitute the trite but comfortable scene of the prosperous middle-aged man's love and happiness in favour of a young and promising actress. He recalled how many last acts in how many comedies had owed their success to this situation, never failed with an audience. But then the average audience was middle-aged. Thinking of the many audiences from private boxes he had looked down, John saw that bald heads always predominated in the auditorium; and he felt that those bald heads had been only too ready to neglect the charms of a heroine who rejected the dashing jeune première and threw herself into the arms of the elderly actor-manager. It was impossible to think of any infirmity severe enough to make an actor-manager. But a play was make-believe: in the end, events would probably turn out quite differently. It would be depressing, if he offered to make Doris and Hugh settle together by settling upon them a handsome income, Doris jumping at the prospect. Perhaps it would be prudent not to suggest any possibility of a marriage between them. It might even be more prudent not to mention the subject of marriage at all. John looked at his secretary, and what surely must have been a very eloquent glance in her eyes because she dropped her pencil, blushed, and took his hand.

"How much simpler life is than art," John murmured. He would never have dared to allow one to say that.

John murmured something about a trying interview with Janet Bond, lit a cigar, remembered it was rude to light cigars when people were still eating, threw the cigar away, and sat down with an appearance of exhaustion in one of those dining-room armchairs that stand and wait all their lives to serve a moment like this.

"I'm sorry, but I must ask you to go off as soon as you've finished your lunch, Hugh. I've a lot of important business to transact with Miss Hamilton."

"Oh, but I've finished already," she exclaimed jumping up from the table.

It was the first pleasant moment in John's day, and he smiled gratefully. He felt he could even afford to be generous to this intrusive brother, and before he left the room with Miss Hamilton he invited him to have some more celery.

"And you'll find a cigar in the sideboard," he added. "But Maud will look after you. Maud, look after Mr. Hugh, please, and if anybody calls this afternoon, I'm not at home."

## Chapter Sixteen

JOHN'S first impulse had been to pour out to Doris's ear the tale of his wrongs, and all that had sufficiently impressed her with the position in which the world was trying to place him to marry him as the only way to escape from his thoughts, he decided that she might be offended by the notion of having been compromised by him and to resent the notion of their marriage's being no more than a matter of public opinion. He therefore abandoned the idea of relying upon the scandal their association had created and proposed to substitute the trite but alluring scene of the prosperous middle-aged man's renunciation of love and happiness in favour of a young and penniless girl. He recalled how many last acts in how many comedies had owed their success to this situation and never failed with an audience. But then the average audience was middle-aged. Thinking of the many audiences from private boxes he had looked down, John was aware that bald heads always predominated in the auditorium; and usually those bald heads had been only too ready to nod at a heroine who rejected the dashing jeune premier and threw herself into the arms of the elderly actor-manager. It was impossible to think of any infirmity severe enough to make a marriage with an actor-manager. But a play was make-believe: in real life events would probably turn out quite differently. It might be depressing, if he offered to make Doris and Hugh together by settling upon them a handsome income, and Doris jumping at the prospect. Perhaps it would be more prudent not to suggest any possibility of a marriage between them. It might even be more prudent not to mention the subject of marriage at all. John looked at his secretary and what surely must have been a very eloquent glance in her eyes because she dropped her pencil, blushed, and took his hand.

"How much simpler life is than art," John murmured. He would never have dared to allow one of his heroines

moment of supreme emotion like this to crane his neck across a wide table in order to kiss the heroine. Any audience would have laughed at such an awkward gesture; yet, though he only managed to reach her lips with half an inch to spare, the kiss was not at all funny somehow. No, it ranked with Paolo's or Anthony's or any other famous lover's kiss.

"And now of course I can't be your secretary any longer," she sighed.

"Why? Do you disapprove of wives' helping their husbands?"

"I don't think you really want to get married, do you?"

"My dear, I'm absolutely dying to get married."

"Truly?"

"Doris, look at me."

And surely she looked at him with more admiration than he had ever looked at himself in a glass.

"What a time I shall have with mother," she gasped with the gurgling triumphant laugh of a child who has unexpectedly found the way to open the store-cupboard.

"Oh, no, you won't," John prophesied confidently. "I'm not going to have such an excellent last scene spoilt by unnecessary talk. We'll get married first and tell everybody afterwards. I've lately discovered what an amazing capacity ordinary human nature has for invention. It really frightens me for the future of novelists, who I cannot believe will be wanted much longer. Oh no, Doris, I'm not going to run the risk of hearing any preliminary gossip about our marriage. Neither your mother nor my relations nor the general public are going to have any share in it before or after. In fact to be brief I propose to elope. Notwithstanding my romantic plays I have spent a private life of utter dulness. This is my last opportunity to do anything unusual. Please, my dearest girl, let me experience the joys of an actual elopement before I relapse into eternal humdrumery."

"A horrid description of marriage!" she protested.

"Comparative humdrumery, I should have said, comparative, that is to say, with the excesses attributed to me by rumour. I've often wanted to write a play about Tiberius, and I feel well equipped to do so now. But I'm serious about

## Poor Relations

the elopement. I really do want to avoid tongues."

"I believe you're afraid of them."

"I am. I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm them," he said.

"But where are we going to elope to?"

John picked up the *Times*.

"If only the *Murmania*," he began. "And will too," he cried. "Yes, she's due to sail from April 1st."

"But that's your birthday," she objected.

"Exactly."

"And I've already sent out those invitations."

"Exactly. For some years my relations have April-fool of me by dining at my expense on that two corner-cupboards overflowing with their gifts remarkable exhibition of cheapness and ingenuity. This year I am going to make April fools of them."

"By marrying me?" she laughed.

"Well, of course it's no use pretending that delighted by that joke, though I intend to play a more elaborately unpleasant. At the back of all exists one anxiety—the dispositions of my last will ment. Very well. I am going to cure that well by leaving them Ambles. I can't imagine any irritating than to be left a house in common with of people whom you hate. Oh, it's an exquisite Darling secretary, take down for dictation as you the following:

"I, John Touchwood, playwright, of 36 Church Road, N.W., and Ambles, Wrotham, Hants, do and bequeath."

"I don't understand," she said. "Are you read a will? or are you only playing a joke?"

"Both."

"But is this really to take effect when you're dear, I wish you wouldn't talk about death when said I'll marry you."

John paused thoughtfully:

"It does seem rather a challenge to fate," he agreed. "know what I'll do. I'll make over Ambles to them at once. After all, I am dead to them, for I'll never have anything more to do with any of them. Cross out what you took down I'll alter the form. Begin as for a letter :

"*My dear relations,*

*When you read this I shall be far away . . .* I think that's the correct formula?" he asked.

"It sounds familiar from many books," she assured him.

"*. . . far away on my honeymoon with Miss Doris Hamilton.* Perhaps that sounds a little ambiguous. Cross out the maiden name and substitute *with Mrs. John Touchwood, my former secretary.* Since you have attributed to us every link except that of matrimony you will no doubt be glad of this opportunity to contradict the outrageous tales you have most of you . . . I say most of you," John explained, "because I don't really think the children started any scandal . . . *you have most of you been at such pains to invent and circulate.* Realizing that this announcement will come as a sad blow, I am going to soften it as far as I can by making you a present of my country house in Hampshire, and I am instructing my solicitors to effect the conveyance in due form. From now onwards therefore one fifth of Ambles will belong to James and Beatrice, one fifth to George, Eleanor, Bertram, and Viola, one fifth to Hilda and Harold, one fifth to Edith, Laurence, and Frida, and one fifth to Hugh. . . I feel that Hugh is entitled to a proportionately larger share," he said with his eyes on the ceiling, "because I understand that I've robbed him of you."

"Who on earth told you that?" she demanded putting down her pencil.

"Never mind," said John humming gaily his exultation.

"Continue please, Miss Hamilton! *I shall make no attempt to say which fifth of the house shall belong to whom. Possibly Laurence and Hilda will argue that out between them, and if any structural alterations are required no doubt Hugh will charge himself with them. The twenty-acre field is included in the gift, so that there will be plenty of ground for any alterations or extensions deemed necessary by the future owners.*"

## Poor Relations

"How ridiculous you are . . . John," she said, and all sounds as absurdly practical—as if you really

"My dear girl, I do mean it. Continue p<sup>1</sup> ton! I have long felt that the collection of butterflies by Daniel Curtis in the Brazils should be suitably proposed that a portion of the stables should be put to reception together with what is left of the collection of dragon-flies made by James. My solicitors will give £50 for this purpose and Harold can act as curator. It will be known as the Touchwood Museum. With regard to the future, the family knows that I have invested in mahogany plantations of Mr. Sydney Ricketts in B. and if Hugh does not take up his post within three months, I shall ask Mr. Ricketts to accept Harold as a pupil in jurisprudence. He had better begin to study Hondurasian or whatever is called at once. Until Harold is called upon to marry, I shall instruct Mr. Ricketts to put the interest of the estate while on the subject of nephews and nieces, I maintain that the family pictures and family silver will be better off. Ambles to be held in trust for Bertram upon his coming of age. Furthermore, I am prepared to pay for the education of Harold, Frida, and Viola at good boarding-schools. I shall practise her dancing in the holidays. Bertram's I shall provide for when the time comes. I do not wish George any excuse for remaining at Halma House—and I hope that a private sitting-room will be awarded to him. In the event of undue congestion his knitting would be a model of Laurence's poetic composition, and his system of backgammon favourites in imagination can be carried on as easily at home as in London. If he still hankers after a sea voyage, the trip of Harold and himself in a Canadian canoe will give him the nautical adventure he requires. My solicitors have been instructed to place a canoe at his disposal. To James who has reproved me for my optimism I would say once more 'If new critical weeklies' and remind him that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. In other words he has got a pound out of me, and he won't get another penny. Eleanor has shown herself so well able to look after herself that I am not inclined to insult her by offering to look after her. Hilda with her fi-



"It does seem rather a challenge to fate," he agreed. "I know what I'll do. I'll make over Ambles to them at once. After all, I am dead to them, for I'll never have anything more to do with any of them. Cross out what you took down. I'll alter the form. Begin as for a letter:

*"My dear relations,*

*When you read this I shall be far away . . . I think that's the correct formula?"* he asked.

"It sounds familiar from many books," she assured him.

*" . . . far away on my honeymoon with Miss Doris Hamilton. Perhaps that sounds a little ambiguous. Cross out the maiden name and substitute with Mrs. John Touchwood, my former secretary. Since you have attributed to us every link except that of matrimony you will no doubt be glad of this opportunity to contradict the outrageous tales you have most of you . . . I say most of you,"* John explained, "because I don't really think the children started any scandal . . . you have most of you been at such pains to invent and circulate. Realizing that this announcement will come as a sad blow, I am going to soften it as far as I can by making you a present of my country house in Hampshire, and I am instructing my solicitors to effect the conveyance in due form. From now onwards therefore one fifth of Ambles will belong to James and Beatrice, one fifth to George, Eleanor, Bertram, and Viola, one fifth to Hilda and Harold, one fifth to Edith, Laurence, and Frida, and one fifth to Hugh. . . . I feel that Hugh is entitled to a proportionately larger share," he said with his eyes on the ceiling, "because I understand that I've robbed him of you."

"Who on earth told you that?" she demanded putting down her pencil.

"Never mind," said John humming gaily his exultation. "Continue please, Miss Hamilton! I shall make no attempt to say which fifth of the house shall belong to whom. Possibly Laurence and Hilda will argue that out between them, and if any structural alterations are required no doubt Hugh will charge himself with them. The twenty-acre field is included in the gift, so that there will be plenty of ground for any alterations or extensions deemed necessary by the future owners."



he house and her small private income will have nothing to do except fuss about the proportionate expenses of the various members of the family who choose to inhabit Ambles. I am affording her a unique opportunity of being disagreeable, of which I'm sure she will take the fullest advantage. I may say that no financial allowance will be made to those who prefer to live elsewhere. As for Laurence, his theatrical future under the patronage of Sir Percy Mortimer is no doubt secure. However, if he grows tired of playing butlers, I hope that his muse will welcome him back to Ambles as affectionately as his wife.

I don't think I have anything more to say, my dear relations, except that I hope the presents you are bringing me for my birthday will come in useful as knick-knacks for your delightful house. You can now circulate as many stories about me as you like. You can even say that I have founded a lunatic asylum at Ambles. I am so happy in the prospect of my marriage that I cannot feel very hardly towards you all, and so I wish you good luck.

Your affectionate brother, brother-in-law and uncle  
John Touchwood.

"Type that out, please, Miss Hamilton, while I drive down to Doctors Commons to see about the licence and book our berths in the *Murmania*."

John had never tasted any success so sweet as the success of these two days before his forty-third birthday; and he was glad to find that Doris having once made up her mind about getting married showed no signs of imperilling the adventure by confiding her intention to her mother.

"Dear John," she said, "I bolted to America with Ida Merritt last year without a word to mother until I sent her a wireless from an board. Surely I may elope with you . . . and explain afterwards."

"You don't think it will kill her?" suggested John a little anxiously. "People are apparently quite ready to accuse one of breaking a maternal heart as lightly as they would accuse one of breaking an appointment."

"Dear John, when we're married she'll be delighted."

"Not too delighted, eh, darling? I mean not so delighted

